

Spring 2008

"That's What I'll Remember": Louise Glück's Odyssey from Nostos to Nostalgia

Corinne Ondine Pache
Trinity University, cpache@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/class_faculty



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Pache, C.O. (2008). "That's what I'll remember": Louise Glück's Odyssey from *nostos* to nostalgia. *Classical and Modern Literature*, 28(2), 1-14.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Classical Studies Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

**“That’s what I’ll remember”:
Louise Glück’s *Odyssey* from *Nostos* to Nostalgia¹**

Corinne Ondine Pache

From Vergil’s *Aeneid* to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, writers have used the *Odyssey* as a framework to explore the meaning of memory, home, and homecoming. When the American poet Louise Glück looks at a marriage unraveling in her collection of poems entitled *Meadowlands* (Glück 1996), she too turns to the *Odyssey*.² Some of the poems in the collection refer directly to their ancient model as Glück gives voice to Circe’s regrets and anger, Penelope’s grief, and Telemachus’ ambivalence towards his parents. Other poems allude less transparently to their Homeric antecedents, but also go back to their ancient source as Glück explores the link between ideas of homecoming and grief. In this paper I examine the role of nostalgia as it plays out in Glück’s *Meadowlands*, and trace the various paths that link her poetry with the ancient Greek epic tradition.

Nostalgia is very much a “historical emotion,” as Svetlana Boym puts it in her fascinating study of the modern history of the concept (Boym 2001). The word was created by a doctor, Johannes Hofer, who combined the two Greek terms for homecoming (*nostos*) and grief (*algos*) in his dissertation, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia*, first published in Basel in 1688. Hofer defines nostalgia as a physical phenomenon, a medical condition afflicting people who are away from their country; in short, a disease with specific causes, symptoms, and cure.³ More recently, nostalgia has come to

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were given at the New York Classical Club Winter Conference and at the Stanford Humanities Center workshop “Translations and Transformations of Classical Texts,” and I am grateful to all those present for their stimulating questions and insights. I am also grateful to the *CML* anonymous referee, Michael Barnes, Justin Isenhardt, and Susanna Braund for their help with this project.

² L. Glück, *Meadowlands* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1996).

³ J. Hofer, *Dissertatio Medica De Nostalgia*, Oder Heimwehe (1688). A translation of the work can be found in C. K. Anspach, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes

be understood in temporal terms rather than as a physiological phenomenon. As a psychological condition, nostalgia has also become an ailment without cure: no longer the *mal du pays* of the homesick mercenary soldier pining for his homeland, nostalgia has instead become a longing for a real or, more often, imaginary past, and, as Boym writes, a refusal “to surrender to the irreversibility of time.”⁴

Glück’s narrative is permeated with longing. A collection of 46 short lyric poems describing the dissolution of a marriage, *Meadowlands* interweaves a first-person contemporary narrative with ancient voices and the tale of Odysseus’ and Penelope’s long-delayed reunion. Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah Roberts have shown in a 2002 article how *Meadowlands* provides a lyric take on the *Odyssey* that allows Glück “to remember what epic forgets” by highlighting in her narrative elements that are obscured in the epic.⁵ As she transforms the Homeric *nostos* into a narrative of disintegration and loss, Glück also draws upon an epic understanding of homecoming as fraught with ambiguities: the impetus for

Hofer, 1688,” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934). Although Hofer also considered nostomania and philopatridomania, and in a second edition of the dissertation in 1710, replaced the word “nostalgia” throughout by the more precise, if less elegant, “pothopatridalgia” (pain caused by the longing for home), it is the original creation of the nineteen-year-old doctor that has since captured the imagination of scientists and artists alike. The illness occurred frequently enough in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to cause the ban of a traditional Swiss song in the French army, because of the song’s powerful effect on Swiss mercenaries. This song, “Le Ranz des Vaches,” would cause Swiss soldiers to burst into tears, desert, or even die, whenever they heard it. Hofer had written his dissertation in Basel, and soon a connection was posited between the sickness and Switzerland itself: the illness struck so many young people from Switzerland, that it led some students of the disease—though not Hofer himself, who rejected this particular theory—to speculate that there was something in the physical make-up of mountain-dwellers that made them particularly prone to nostalgia. An account from 1732, for example, describes how the Swiss, accustomed to a “lighter” kind of air, find breathing difficult in other countries (Haller, *Relation d’un voyage de Albert de Haller dans l’Oberland Bernois*, printed in F. Ernst, *Vom Heimweh*. Zürich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1949, 89–90). Cures for nostalgia differed according to the severity of the symptoms, and ranged from purging to “opening of the greater brachial veins,” but the most effective remedy, as long as the patient was strong enough for travel, was of course to return to the Fatherland, to go home: that is to say, *nostos*. For a discussion of the early history of nostalgia, see S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3–4; see also J. Starobinski, “Le concept de nostalgie,” *Diogenes* 54 (1966). For an eighteenth-century discussion of “Le Ranz des Vaches,” see Rousseau, J.-J., *Dictionary of Music*, translated by William Waring (London, 1779) 267. For the lyrics and history of the song, see G. Métraux, *Le Ranz des vaches du chant de bergers à l’hymne patriotique* (Lausanne: Editions 24 Heures, 1984).

⁴ See Boym (above, note 2), xv–xvi.

⁵ S. Murnaghan and D. H. Roberts, “Penelope’s Song: The Lyric Odysseys of Linda Pasta and Louise Glück,” *Classical and Modern Literature* 22 (2002): 28.

the journey is a desire to reconnect with a lost past; *nostos* thus implies memory, and memory, for Glück, entails loss and mourning. In *Meadowlands*, homecoming occurs only through memory: the narrator remembers past happiness while the poet invokes and explores the ancient relationship between Penelope and Odysseus. The poem’s contemporary characters do not allude to their Homeric counterparts in their own voice; yet by interleaving the modern narrative with poems focusing on Penelope and Odysseus, Glück plays a game of mutual mirroring and refraction that allows the reader to see the contemporary narrative in light of its Homeric predecessor. Although she does not use the term “nostalgia” in *Meadowlands*, Glück puts nostalgia at the core of her poem by going back to the epic theme of *nostos* and linking it to the experience of grief.

The themes of memory and longing for homecoming explored by Glück in *Meadowlands* find their first expression in the *Odyssey*. We find that the feeling of nostalgia predates Hofer’s diagnosis and that grief and homecoming are already intricately intertwined in Homer’s narrative, especially in Book 5, where we first meet the hero in person (5.149–158):

While she [Calypso], the queenly nymph, after she had heard the message from Zeus, went to great-hearted Odysseus, and found him sitting on the seashore, and his eyes were never dry of tears, and the sweet lifetime was draining out of him, as he lamented for a way home [*nostos*], since the nymph was no longer pleasing to him. By nights he would lie beside her, of necessity, in the hollow caverns, against his will, by one who was willing, but by day he would sit upon the rocks, at the seaside, breaking his heart in tears and lamentation and sorrow [*algos*] as weeping tears he looked out over the barren water.⁶

Although the narrator and characters often mention Odysseus in the first four books of the *Odyssey*, this is the first time we see the hero face to face; we find the cunning hero of the Trojan War, the Sacker of cities, who does not shed a single tear in the *Iliad*, repeatedly weeping for his homecoming. Indifferent to his surroundings, Odysseus yearns for another place and laments his *nostos* (*νόστον ὀδυρομένω*, 5.153). The poet emphasizes Odysseus’ tears through repetition—“tears,” “tears and lamentation,” “weeping tears”—and also by describing the same scene twice: we see it once, in the passage quoted here, through the eyes of Calypso, and again, a little earlier in Book 5, from the perspective of the narrator.⁷ Odysseus on the island of Calypso is entirely focused on the

⁶ Translations of the *Odyssey* are modified from Lattimore.

⁷ Through the eyes of the narrator: *Od.* 5.82–84; through Calypso’s eyes: *Od.* 5.151–153. See I. J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge:

past, and he experiences desire for his homeland as grief; the two notions, home and sorrow, are also intimately associated in the poem from its first lines: “many pains he suffered in his heart on the open sea, / struggling for his own life and the return of his companions.”⁸ Odysseus’ tears connect him with the object of his desire: like her husband, Penelope is crying the first time she appears in the *Odyssey*, longing for Odysseus as she listens to the bard singing the *nostos* of the Achaeans who made it back home (1.326–336). Tears link Odysseus and Penelope throughout the narrative until their reunion in Book 23 where they finally weep together (23.207 and 232).

Glück’s poem focuses on a relationship, and on the ways in which the people involved understand, tell, and remember their own stories, another concern it shares with the *Odyssey*. Husband and wife give voice to their sorrows and speak to one another in a dialogue that runs through the collection. As Murnaghan and Roberts have noted, *Meadowlands* explicitly gives the wife the role of story-teller by introducing the narrative with a prelude that describes the collection as a song she sings at her husband’s request:⁹

Let’s play choosing music. Favorite form.

Opera.

Favorite work.

Figaro. No. Figaro and Tannhauser. Now
it’s your turn: sing one for me.

The wife’s suggestion to play “choosing music” announces the poem’s abiding concern with the connection between art and life. Since the first poem of the collection is titled “Penelope’s Song,” *Meadowlands* may appear, at least at first reading, prepared to offer us Penelope’s version of the *Odyssey*. Yet the poem resists such a monological reading: the wife’s perspective dominates, but it is not the only one.¹⁰ The change from epic

Cambridge University Press, 2001), *ad* 150–159. On Odysseus’ absence of tears in the *Iliad*, see C. Pache, “War Games: Odysseus at Troy,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100 (2000): 15–23.

⁸ On the connection between Odysseus’ mind and his return home, see D. Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 34–80.

⁹ See Murnaghan and Roberts (above, note 4), 21–22.

¹⁰ See P. Breslin’s essay on Glück in J. F. Diehl, *On Louise Glück: Change What You See* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 109. As Breslin notes, the dialogue

to lyric is crucial: as the narrator puts it in “Parable of the Dove,” “change your form and you change your nature.” *Meadowlands* is a lyric palimpsest of the *Odyssey*, on which Glück inscribes the disintegration of a contemporary marriage seen through different perspectives, ancient and modern. In the process, she erases, transforms, and recreates parts of the older narrative, and the interaction between the two texts elucidates each other.

Although we do not have a journey *per se* in *Meadowlands*, the narrative, like the *Odyssey*, is permeated with the idea that memory and homecoming are attended by grief, and, moreover, that homecoming is invariably accompanied by the contrary experiences of separation, loss, and mourning. Being at home together does not preclude separation. The “lady” who “weeps at a dark window” in the beginning of the poem “Moonless Night,” weeps not because of her husband’s physical absence, but because of his growing indifference. And tears, rather than bring people together, create more distance. In a cruel inversion of the lovely scene in the *Iliad* where Andromache smiles in her tears as she cradles her crying baby in her arms, after he has been frightened by his father’s plumed helmet (6.484), Glück’s Telemachus remembers: “I used to smile / when my mother wept” (“Telemachus’ Guilt”). In “Midnight,” the wife finds herself alone “weeping in the dark garage,” unable to respond to her husband’s calling her. In the same house, husband and wife grow increasingly distant. In *Meadowlands*, homecoming will only happen in memory.

Like the poem’s title, which conjures at once the bucolic meadows of the ancient poets and the devastated industrial landscape of northern New Jersey, Glück’s *Meadowlands* evokes a conflation of contraries. The motif of the meadow, as we will see shortly, also provides an important link between ancient and modern narrative. *Meadowlands* is the title not only of the collection, but also of three interconnected poems in the form of a conversation between husband and wife. The first two poems offer husband’s and wife’s very different perspectives on their neighbors and their lives. In “Meadowlands 3,” the wife muses about the name given to this area of New Jersey, and the ironic stichomythic exchange moves from the landscape to the football team that plays in the stadium of the same name. Ostensibly arguing about football players and the name of a stadium, wife and husband present two ways of looking at the world. The

between *Meadowlands* and its ancient model goes both ways: “Glück succeeds in making myth and quotidian experience illuminate each other. She shows us how much stifled rage there must have been in the familial relations among Penelope, Odysseus, and Telemachus, but also how much misgiving loyalty and furtive love hide beneath the bickering of her modern couple.”

wife refuses to see the past as a valid premise for the present, and rebels against the act of remembering upon which nostalgia depends:

How could the Giants name
that place the Meadowlands? It has
about as much in common with a pasture
as would the inside of an oven.

New Jersey
was rural. They want you
to remember that.

Simms
was not a thug. LT
was not a thug.

What I think is we should
look at our surroundings
realistically, for what they are
in the present.

That's what
I tell you about the house.

No giant
would talk the way you talk. You'd be a nicer person
if you were a fan of something.
When you do that with your mouth
you look like your mother.

You know what they are?
Kings among men.

So what king
fired Simms?

Like the *Odyssey*, *Meadowlands* has much to say about the relationship of past and present. In this exchange, the husband sees the world in time; the wife claims she wants to live in the present, but is distressed by the changes brought on by time both on the landscape and on her marriage. The notion that the Meadowlands was named by the Giants assimilates the members of a football team to creatures of ancient myth, and retrojects the contemporary landscape into a mythical one. The area got its name, as the husband points out, not from the Giants—whether mythical figures or contemporary athletes—but from the landscape, even as these features are no longer distinguishable. For him, memories inform the present and the past is alive in people and the landscape alike: great football players should

be recalled for their past accomplishments;¹¹ and the landscape has a past, which survives in its name and which one should remember. Another instance of the husband’s temporal perspective occurs when he describes his wife as “looking like” her mother, “When you do that with your mouth,” a callous comparison that likens her to someone she most likely does not wish to become, but that also evokes at once her childhood as a daughter and her future old age.

The wife is troubled by the discrepancy between past and present, between name and place, and between what her marriage once was and what it has now become. For her, the Meadowlands “has about as much in common with a pasture as would the inside of an oven,” an object that symbolizes at once civilization and its worse excesses, both bread making and metal shaping and the holocaust. The oven also evokes images of domestic drudgery and perhaps the suicide of another poet, Sylvia Plath. For the wife, the past is irrelevant, and both landscape and people must be seen as they are in the present. Neither the wife’s rejection of nostalgia, nor the husband’s refuge in memory provides an effective defense against a present that is as grim and hopeless as the ravaged landscape.

As we can see from the title of the collection and of individual poems, the image of the meadow is central to the narrative. In “Meadowlands 3,” Glück plays on the ironic juxtaposition of the Meadowlands’ pastoral past (“New Jersey was rural”) and its devastated present, which provides a crucial parallel for the disintegration of the speakers’ marriage. The meadows of Meadowlands have been spoiled and exist only as a memory. Yet the meadow is a space of both destruction and creation. The word “meadow” is in fact etymologically connected to “aftermath” (literally “after the mowing”), thus evoking both the consequences of destruction—what remains after a devastating event such as war—and the potential for renewal in the form of the crop of new grass

¹¹ There are only a few datable references in the poem, which is otherwise remarkable for its timelessness: a mention of Otis Redding in “Otis,” towards the end of the poem, and this allusion to the Giants in the 1990s, which is bound to be obscure to most poetry readers who are not football fans. Phil Simms and “LT” (Lawrence Taylor) were star players for the New York Giants football team. Simms was a quarterback for the New York Giants from 1979–1994. In 1994, the team’s coach gave him a choice between retirement and being released from the team; Simms chose the latter. His high salary and a shoulder injury were central to the decision to let him go (Dave Anderson, “The Cruellest Sack of All For Simms,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1994). Lawrence Taylor was a linebacker for the same team from 1981–1993, and ran into legal problems in the 1990s for drug and tax evasion charges (Dave Anderson, “Losing Himself to Find Himself,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2003).

that springs up after the mowing.¹² Glück's *Meadowlands* thus is a site of anguish, but not completely without hope.

The motif of the meadow is also an important link with the Homeric model, in which meadows have an ambivalent function.¹³ Meadows in ancient Greek poetry are typically liminal places: think of the meadow where Persephone plucks the narcissus or the asphodel meadows of the Underworld where the soul of Achilles strides. Odysseus encounters many meadows besides the one in Hades: the meadow that surrounds the grove of Athena near the city of the Phaiacians, the soft, lush meadows on Goat Island, and the blossoming meadows of the Sirens. As these examples illustrate, meadows are often hazardous to Odysseus: places that offer temptation that would distract the hero from his return—be it the temptation of the Sirens' song or an adulterous alternative domestic space, far from Ithaka. The most dangerous and tempting meadow in the *Odyssey* is in fact the place where Odysseus spends the most time away from home and the place where we first see him in the *Odyssey*, Calypso's island, a place described as a perfect *locus amoenus*—a grotto surrounded by a fragrant grove watered by four fountains, a place where all kinds of birds gather and vegetation flourishes (5.72–74): “and around there were meadows (λειμῶν) growing soft with parsley / and violets. Even a god who came into that place / would have been awed at what he saw, the heart delighted within him.”

A site of exquisite beauty that amazes and delights even the gods, Calypso's island, as its mistress's name (from *καλύπτειν*, “to hide”) implies, is also a hiding place. To Odysseus, the soft fields of parsley and violets of Ogygia are as threatening as the Sirens' corpse-strewn meadow: the pleasures of Calypso's and the Sirens' meadows both could mean death and oblivion for the hero. Odysseus, in fact, is yearning and crying for a return to the only place in the *Odyssey* that is described as noticeably lacking meadows (4.605–608):

There are no wide courses in Ithaka, no meadow [λειμῶν];
it is a place to feed goats, and lovelier than a place to feed horses;
for none of the islands has meadows for driving horses;
they all slope down towards the sea; and Ithaka more than all the others.

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. “aftermath” 1: “Second or later mowing; the crop of grass which springs up after the mowing in early summer.”

¹³ See, e.g. G. Crane, *Calypso: Backgrounds and Conventions of the Odyssey*, Athenäum Monografien. Altertumswissenschaft ; Bd. 191 (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), 15–18.

The absence of meadows defines Ithaka as a rugged land that is more appropriate for goats than men, yet a “good nurse” for heroes (*Od.* 9.27). It has few of the attractions that Calypso’s Ogygia or Phaiakia offer but all the same remains the focus of Odysseus’ longing.

In “Odysseus’ Decision,” a poem that echoes the passage in *Odyssey* 5 where we first meet the hero crying for his homecoming, Glück describes Odysseus as he decides to leave an island where he is literally held spellbound:

The great man turns his back on the island.
 Now he will not die in paradise
 nor hear again
 the lutes of paradise among the olive trees,
 by the clear pools under the cypresses. Time

begins now, in which he hears again
 that pulse which is the narrative
 sea, at dawn when its pull is strongest.
*What has brought us here
 will lead us away; our ship
 sways in the tinted harbor water.*

Now the spell is ended.
 Give him back his life,
 sea that can only move forward.

While reminiscent of the Homeric passage, Glück’s Odysseus here yearns neither for a homecoming nor a return to the past, and has no thought of a Penelope or Ithaka. This Odysseus is instead a figure of escape: a husband who longs for departure, for what he calls the “narrative sea,” when he hears its call “at dawn when its pull is strongest.” In contrast to the *Odyssey*, which Odysseus himself partly narrates in the first person, the only glimpse of Odysseus’ own thoughts we find in *Meadowlands* are those three lines italicized in the original: “*What has brought us here / will lead us away; our ship / sways in the tinted harbor water.*” “Odysseus’ Decision” offers a distorted mirror image of its epic counterpart seen through the eyes of the wife who has been left behind. As in the *Odyssey*, we see Odysseus’ desire to leave an island, but, despite this island’s resemblance to Ogygia (a paradise with olive trees and cypresses), Glück’s Odysseus has no thought of *nostos* and no memories of a past he wants to reclaim. What this Tennysonian Odysseus longs for is not home or his wife, or even glory, but for more adventures—“to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”—for the “sea that can only move forward.” Moreover, the poet’s deliberate omission of a Calypso figure makes it impossible to tell whether it is his lover or his wife Odysseus desires to leave, whether the spell that must be broken is an

affair or his marriage, and hints at a pattern of myriad departures. There is no *nostos* for Glück's Odysseus.

In *Meadowlands*, the wife retrospectively chooses what she will remember in a poem titled "Departure:"

The night isn't dark; the world is dark.
Stay with me a little longer.

Your hands on the back of the chair---
that's what I'll remember.

Here we find a Penelope figure who foresees her husband's departure, rather than his return, and who projects the present moment onto a future full of longing for the past. The first person narrator also meditates on memory and the creative act of preserving it in one's imagination. Distance and reminiscence eventually allow both husband and wife to understand what they have lost:

That room with its chalk walls---
how will it look to you I wonder
once your exile begins? I think your eyes will seek out
its light as opposed to the moon.
Apparently, after so many years, you need
distance to make plain its intensity.

...

And before that, you are holding me because you are going away---
these are statements you are making,
not questions needing answers.

How can I know you love me
unless I see you grieve over me?

Glück gives a refracted image of the epic pattern of the hero and heroine: instead of an Odysseus focused on his homecoming, we have an Odysseus who yearns to leave, and instead of a Penelope waiting we have a wife imagining her husband's departure. The italicized lines could be spoken by either husband and wife: unable to communicate face to face, they only understand each other from a distance.

Yet all is not bleak in Glück's *Meadowlands*. Glück's vision of the *Odyssey* centers on the grief of the earlier poem, but this grief carries within itself the prospect of redemption in the form of poetry and the connections it creates with the past. By focusing her narrative on nostalgia rather than reunion, on dissolution rather than resolution, Glück transforms her ancient source and offers a resoundingly modern and feminist perspective. Glück's female narrator is the one who defines what will be remembered.

There is no reunion but does that mean there can be no homecoming? The only explicit homecoming in Glück’s poem is that of the female narrator. Linking the notion of homecoming with memory in “Nostos,” the poem that immediately follows “Odysseus’ Decision,” the narrator finds that the only unspoiled meadow to be found in Meadowlands is in the past, and her homecoming takes place in the landscape of memory and childhood:

There was an apple tree in the yard—
this would have been
forty years ago—behind,
only meadow. Drifts
of crocus in the damp grass.

The apple tree (about which I shall have more to say below) foregrounds the meadow that stays behind, in the past. The “drifts of crocus” point to past springs, and also locates the narrator’s memory in the mythic meadow of Persephone, where plucking spring flowers leads Demeter’s daughter to experience both love and death. The adjectival “only” in the phrase, “only meadow,” pictures the meadow of the past as a site of possibilities, not yet thwarted by the dread of the present.

In “Nostos,” as in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the tree is a *sêma*, a “sign” that plays just as crucial a role:

How many times, really, did the tree
flower on my birthday,
the exact day, not
before, not after? Substitution
of the immutable
for the shifting, the evolving.

The apple tree of the narrator’s childhood blurs with other mythic and literary trees: the tree of knowledge, and the loss of innocence it brings about; Sappho’s sweet apple, perhaps, reddening on the highest branch, suggesting a bride’s loveliness and wedding songs; and Homer’s olive tree, certainly, the secret sign that signifies the reunion of husband and wife.¹⁴ In Glück’s vision, “the immutable” exists only in the poet’s imagination, while “the shifting, the evolving” living tree lacks stability and, ultimately, reality. The narrator’s homecoming inevitably brings sorrow as she realizes that experience must yield to time: “We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory.” Echoing Hamlet’s ambiguous last words, “the rest is silence” (*Hamlet* 5.2), Glück highlights the role of memory, both

¹⁴ See Sappho, fr. 105a, “Like the sweet apple reddens on the high branch, on the top of the highest branch.”

in the way in which the narrator of *Meadowlands* understands her past and the role played by the literary tradition in Glück's poetry in general.¹⁵

We saw how Glück gives a more central role to Penelope than the one she plays in the *Odyssey* by identifying the entire poem as her song ("it's your turn: sing one for me"). This change of focus allows Glück to bring to light elements that are obscured in the *Odyssey*, but at the same time, she also marginalizes some of the most prominent aspects of the ancient epic. We might wonder why Glück would use ancient epic at all as an anchor for her narrative. Glück goes back to a Homeric understanding of the *Odyssey*, and her poem substantiates Virginia Woolf's admiration for the poem's characters: "There is a sadness at the back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate. Entirely aware of their own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and gleam of existence, there they endure."¹⁶ It is this "sadness at the back of life" that Glück's *Meadowlands* explores and ultimately celebrates. That her narrator never attempts to mitigate the sadness at the back of life is clear in the poet's statement near the end of Glück's poem, which I would like to use by way of conclusion:

Remember that time you made the wish?

I make a lot of wishes.

The time I lied to you
about the butterfly. I always wondered
what you wished for.

What do you think I wished?

I don't know. That I'd come back,
that we'd somehow be together in the end.

I wished for what I always wish for.
I wished for another poem.

¹⁵ Murnaghan and Roberts (see above, note 4) 3 also connect this poem with the Homeric concept of *nostos*: "Glück substitutes the poet's return in memory to childhood for that legendary homecoming" of Odysseus: "*Meadowlands* plays freely with the story elements of the epic in a way that suggests that the *Odyssey* is itself a part of the world seen in childhood, and now only remembered." Glück herself talks about her childhood memories of ancient Greek myths in L. Glück, *Proofs and Theories. Essays on Poetry* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1994), 7. See also E. C. Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H.D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 190–192.

¹⁶ "On Not Knowing Greek" from V. Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953).

The poet finds consolation in the intensity of experience and in the examined life, but also in finding connections between life and art. The desire for “another poem” is profoundly ambiguous: must the lyric poet favor art over life? Or see life itself as the mere raw material of art? Or does the wish express a desire for creativity in the aftermath of the divorce, or the longing for another outcome, another narrative, another kind of husband? The narrator’s wish can also be understood as a nostalgic desire for the *Odyssey* and its pattern for successful marriage, separation, and reunion. Although Glück herself, in an interview, rejects nostalgia in favor of an “ideal of discovery,” her poem depends for its effect both on previous acquaintance with its model and on her recognition that its ideals are out of reach. It is also telling that Glück implicitly associates nostalgia with self-deception. Yet her constant return to the Greek tradition in her poetry, and her use of the *Odyssey* in *Meadowlands*, point towards a more literal nostalgic impulse: *nostos* means grief, but poetry is itself always a gesture of returning.¹⁷ In *Meadowlands*, separation leads to divorce rather than homecoming, the loss of home rather than its heroic recovery. The meadows that are so threatening to Odysseus’ *nostos* become a site of memory and sorrow in Glück’s poem. For Homer, *algae*—“grief”—is the impetus for homecoming and reunion; for Glück, *nostos* exists only in the act of memory, but grief is redeemed by poetry. We may never recover Ithaka or the pristine meadows of our past, but, with Glück, we can wish for another poem.

Yale University

¹⁷ See “Afterword: The Restorative Power of Art.” Diehl (above, note 15), 191: “For nostalgia, it [the artist’s belief in art] substitutes terror and hunger; for the ideal of restoration it substitutes an ideal of discovery. Toward which end, the artist, like the analyst, cultivates a disciplined refusal of self-deception, which is less a moral position than a pragmatic act, since the only possible advantage of suffering is that it may afford insight.”