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“Persephone the Wanderer:” Myth in the Poetry of Contemporary American Women Poets

„Persefoné Poutnice:” Mýtus v poezii současných amerických básníků

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá vztah starověkých řeckých mýtů a poezie současných básníků v USA. Vzhledem k tomu, že mýty nemají žádnou jednotnou nebo autoritativní verzi, jsou otevřené re-interpretaci a mají povahu palimpsestu; mýty obecně slouží jako meta-vyprávění a jsou charakteristické neustálým přepisováním v různých kontextech. Práce analyzuje díla čtyř současných amerických básníků: Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham a A.E.Stallings. Tyto básnířky vytvářejí alternativní verze mýtu o Persefoně; pro Glück, Dove, Graham a Stallings, a pro mnoho dalších básníků, tento mýtus představuje šanci vypořádat se s dědictvím klasické éry a s tématy lásky, smrti a vztahů matky a dcery. Dva hlavní zdroje mýtu, které představují dvě poněkud odlišné verze zaměřující se na konkrétní aspekty mýtu, „Homerická hymna k Demeter“ a Ovidovy *Metamorfózy*, potvrzují potenciál přepracování mýtu o Persefoně. Každá ze čtyř básnířek přistupuje k mýtu trochu jinak, zatímco všechny pracují se základními motivy v něm obsaženými, jako je napětí mezi životem a smrtí, nebo vztah matka-dcera a dcera-milenec.

Cílem diplomové práce je popsat rozdíly a podobnosti mezi těmito čtyřmi básnířkami a popsat trvalý vliv mýtu o Persefoně na současnou poezii. Interpretace tohoto mýtu se tak stává zásadní: Louise Glück představuje mýtus jako způsob přiblížení se já a traumatu, které tohle já prožívá. Její básně mohou být rozebrány na základě psychoanalýzy; Glück fragmentuje mýtus a trauma aby je mohla popsat, opakovat nebo revidovat. Rita Dove popisuje Persefonu jako vzpurnou dceru a její ztrátu jako obřad přechodu od děvčete k ženství a k identitě nezávislé na Demeter. Dove přetváří tradici jak v obsahu, tak v převážně sonetové formě, kterou používá a současně mýtus zesoučasňuje na několika úrovních v různých básních. Jorie Graham také píše ve fragmentech a z různých úhlů pohledu najednou; její poezie připomíná filmovou montáž. Pro Graham je mýtus jakoby přikrytím dalšího příběhu, který je pak odhalen prostřednictvím re-interpretace. A.E.Stallings mýtus přepisuje s odlišných hledisek Háda a Persefony a soustřeďuje se zejména na jejich vztah a dichotomii života a smrti, která pro ni tvoří základ tohoto mýtu. Práce pak tvrdí, že mýtus o Persefoně se stal tak rozšířeným a populárním u současných básníků, protože obsahuje témata jako napětí mezi životem a smrtí, popisuje vztah tří postav charakterizovaných jejich příslušnými rolemi a umožňuje básnířce vypořádat se s tradicí a současně dodat tomuto mýtu současný smysl.

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the ancient Greek myth of Persephone and the poetry of contemporary U.S. women poets. Since myths do not have a single or authoritative version, they are open to re-writing and are palimpsestic in nature; thus myth in general serves as meta-narrative and is constantly re-written in different contexts. Works of four contemporary American poets are analysed: Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham and A.E.Stallings. These poets create alternative versions of the myth of Persephone; for Glück, Dove, Graham and Stallings, among many other women poets, the Persephone myth presents an opportunity to deal with the heritage of the classical era and themes of love, death and mother-daughter relationship. The potential for rewriting is apparent when considering the two main sources of the myth, the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* which also present slightly different narratives concentrating on particular aspects of the Persephone myth. Each of the four poets approaches myth in a slightly different manner, while working with the basic motifs contained therein.

The objective of the thesis is to describe the differences and similarities between the four re-visions of the Persephone myth and to comment on the lasting influence of myth in contemporary poetry. The interpretation of the mythical story thus becomes crucial. Louise Glück presents myth as a way to approach the self; her poems can be analysed on the basis of psychoanalysis. She fragments the Persephone myth and the trauma which it describes and repeats or revises these parts. Rita Dove, on the other hand, depicts Persephone as a wayward daughter, and her loss as a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, towards an identity independent of Demeter. She negotiates tradition both in the content and in the predominantly sonnet form she uses and contemporizes the myth on several levels in various poems. Jorie Graham also writes in fragments and from various points of view at once; her poetry is reminiscent of a film montage. For Graham, myth is a covering for another story, revealed through re-interpretation. A.E.Stallings re-writes it from differing viewpoints of Hades and Persephone, concentrating especially on their relationship and the life-death dichotomy as the basis of this myth. The thesis maintains that the Persephone myth became so wide-spread and popular among contemporary women poets because it contains themes such as the tension between life and death, describes the relationship of the three characters complicated by their respective roles, and allows the women poet to deal simultaneously with tradition and imbue the story with contemporary meaning.

Mythology is not simply willed into existence, and the peoples of the earth quickly ensured they would no longer understand their own myths. It is at this very moment literature begins. Literature is the attempt to interpret, in an ingenious way, the myths we no longer understand, at the moment we no longer understand them, since we no longer know how to dream them or reproduce them.

Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*

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Introduction

Gilles Deleuze maintains that the beginning of all literature is an effort to understand a mythological story; even if this were not the case, mythological motifs were, and still are, widespread. Such an overwhelming influence of myth depends on the fascination it presents, especially when considered an expression of fundamental feelings common to all humans, or an explanation of unfathomable incidents.¹ As James Campbell states,

[m]ythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy) [...]. Mythology is all of these. The various judgments are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.²

Thus myth remains a widespread theme in contemporary poetry; this thesis analyses works of four contemporary woman poets, namely Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham and A.E.Stallings. They share a fascination with one myth in particular, the myth of Persephone. The thesis first describes two main sources of the myth, the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" and Ovid's version in the *Metamorphoses*; since even the two ancient versions concentrate on different aspects of the mythological story, it is understandable that the myth produces many interpretations, depending predominantly on the aspect the writer wishes to accentuate. The first chapter will thus serve as a theoretic introduction to re-interpretation of myth and will describe the basic motifs the contemporary poets work with: the tension between life and death, the relationship of the daughter and the mother and various definitions of death and afterlife. The remaining part is comprised of four chapters, each containing an analysis of a single poet's re-interpretation of the Persephone myth. The conclusion should provide a clear image of the differences and similarities in the way these poets approach the

1 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *The journal of American folklore* 68.270 (1955): 429, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/536768>> 15 April 2018.

2 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (London:Paladin, 1988): 328.

Persephone myth: their re-visions are not only influenced by their perspective as women and contemporary poets, but also by the very nature of myth, as a narrative open to palimpsestic re-writing.

1. Sources of the Persephone Myth

As women poets, Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham and A.E. Stallings must upon entering the classical tradition confront “the difficulty of reconciling the symbolic power of Graeco-Roman myth with its roots in an overtly patriarchal envisioning of society.”³ To be able to demonstrate how these poets deal with the mythical inspiration, the sources of the Persephone myth must be considered, since it is these sources that inspire the poets in their “poems of the critique of myth.”⁴ It is clear that myths such as that of Persephone present only a very restricted representation of women’s experience; nevertheless, these mythical patterns still fascinate contemporary poets⁵ so that they actively re-write or extend what is implied in myth.

1.1. “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”

“Homeric Hymn to Demeter” presents one of the earliest sources of the Persephone myth: the poem begins by describing a familiar scene in which Persephone is picking flowers away from her mother, Demeter. Persephone sees a flower unlike any other; when she leans to pluck it, the earth opens and Hades seizes her. She cries out to Zeus, her father, but the poem clearly states that the rape happens with Zeus’ consent. While Demeter hears her child crying out, she does not know where Persephone is; she embarks upon a journey to find her. Demeter discovers her daughter’s fate through Helios: “None other of the deathless gods is to blame, but only cloud-gathering Zeus who gave her to Hades, her father’s brother, to be called his buxom wife. And Hades seized her and took her loudly crying in his chariot down to his realm of mist and gloom.”⁶ Helios attempts to comfort Demeter by saying that her daughter is now the wife of the King of the Underworld, but to no avail – a “grief yet more terrible and savage came into the heart of Demeter.”⁷

Demeter then wanders in a form of an old woman: the hymn continues by a story of Demophöon. Demeter offers to bring him up and decides to make the boy immortal by anointing him in ambrosia by day and putting him into a fire by night. But the boy’s mother spies Demeter putting him into the fire, and her anguish angers the goddess, who promises to

3 Isobel Hurst, “‘Love and Blackmail’: Demeter and Persephone,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 4.2 (2012): 181, Arts & Humanities Citation Index <<http://crj.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/2/176.full.pdf+html>> 3 April 2018.

4 Hurst 176.

5 Hurst 176.

6 H. G. Evelyn-White trans., *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homeric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914) reproduced in Aaron J. Atsma, *Theoi Project Classical Texts Library* (2000) <<http://www.theoi.com/Text/HomericHymns1.html>> 17 May 2018. The whole passage presents a retelling of the source text.

7 Evelyn-White.

take revenge on the boy when he is grown. To win back her favour, Demeter then demands a temple to be built in her name, where she would personally teach the people her rites. Meanwhile Demeter makes the earth to be infertile and causes a famine among both men and gods; Zeus, upon seeing this, interferes and sends for Persephone. Hades, however, gives Persephone some pomegranate seeds, so that she will be unable to stay with her mother forever, but must return to him for “the third part of the seasons.”⁸ Nevertheless, Demeter is glad to have her daughter back and her anger abates; this allows the earth to turn fertile again. Finally, she reveals to the people her mysteries and ascends to Olympus, reconciled.

As the name of the hymn suggests, it is almost entirely concerned with Demeter and her reaction to Persephone’s rape. The emphasis is upon a mother’s love for her daughter; this aspect of the Persephone myth is highlighted in Rita Dove’s *Mother Love*. Persephone is separated from her mother in a distorted reflection of a wedding rite: she is promised to Hades by her father, regardless of either her or her mother’s wishes. But Demeter’s power partially reverses the inevitable loss of the daughter: by causing a famine and thus threatening the gods themselves, Demeter achieves a partial victory over the rights of the father. In this sense, the myth of Persephone may reflect the unavoidable separation between a mother and a daughter, brought on by a third party, the lover. Louise Glück makes use of this motif, complicating it by equating the lover with death. The version of myth presented by “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” was possibly intended as an explanation for the Eleusinian mysteries, as the importance of the Demophöon part suggests. Among the four poets, only Jorie Graham draws on this episode. The Persephone myth, according to Mircea Eliade, reflects the myth of eternal return; it is thus similar to myths of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis or Ishtar, whose death are “creative,” “in the sense that they bear some relation to vegetation.”⁹ The death (and sometimes return to life) of these gods then relates to vegetation or initiatory ceremonies. While it is possible to simplify the myth to this basic precept, it always affords various perspectives, depending on the theme the poet wishes to explore.

1.2 Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

Book V of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* presents an extended version of the Persephone myth, recounted by Calliope. Ovid, of course, uses the Roman names for the characters: Ceres (Demeter), Pluto (Hades) and Proserpine (Persephone). To avoid confusion, the thesis will use

⁸ Evelyn-White.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or Cosmos and History*, transl. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974) 110.

Greek names consistently. The story begins by Hades appearing on the earth to inspect Sicily's foundations after an earthquake. He sees Persephone and is overcome by love, or as Ovid writes, by Venus. Since Venus was already able to overpower all the gods of Olympus, she tests her strength on the King of the Underworld. Persephone is then "seen, beloved, and carried off."¹⁰ By the entrance to Tartarus, Hades is stopped by a nymph, Cyane, who entreats him not to carry Persephone away against her mother's will; he strikes the nymph in anger and she dissolves into a lake. Demeter searches for her lost daughter: she finds out what happened when she sees Persephone's girdle swimming on the Cyane Lake. Demeter, angered by this, refuses to grant the earth corn and comes to Zeus (Jupiter) to ask her daughter back. Zeus allows Persephone to return, under the condition that she tasted nothing in the Underworld; however, Persephone, was, according to Ovid, thoughtless and broke her fast by eating seven pomegranate seeds. She is thus divided between her existence on the earth and in the Underworld: because of her, the year is divided in equal parts, one plentiful and the other barren. Ovid maintains that Persephone is satisfied by this conclusion: "now as a goddess [she] beams in joyful smiles."¹¹

In the *Metamorphoses* myth serves mainly, though not exclusively, as an explanation of the passing of the seasons, in which Demeter presents the source of agriculture and laws. This version gives voice to Persephone: she, in fact, tells the story of the abduction and her stay in the Underworld. However, contemporary poets are more mistrustful of her easy acceptance of Hades, especially Louise Glück and A.E. Stallings. Ovid's version introduces the relationship of Hades and Persephone, whose divided existence is open to various interpretations. But most importantly, by re-writing the myth again in *Fasti* Ovid emphasizes the myth's pliability and authorizes the continuous reworking of the mythical source.¹² The subsequent re-workings based on his version of the myth "focus on Demeter and Persephone and involve critiques of marriage, family structure and the dynamics of rape."¹³

10 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co, 1922) reproduced in Aaron J. Atsma, *Theoi Project Classical Texts Library* (2000) <<http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses5.html>> 15 May 2018. The whole passage presents a retelling of the source text.

11 Ovid.

12 Hurst 179.

13 Hurst 179.

2. Myth in the 20th century poetry

This theoretical introduction would not be complete without a brief overview of the possible approaches to mythological material in 20th century, with special emphasis upon women writers. The modernist use of myth seems to fall largely under the approach of T.S.Eliot's mythical method. In his well-known review of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923 Eliot characterized this method as "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."¹⁴ While Eliot is rather brief when it comes to defining this concept, the most important characteristic of the method is the juxtaposition of two narratives, one mythical and one modern; in the context of this thesis, Rita Dove can be said to use this method. On the other hand, instead of simple juxtaposition, she attempts to find a connection between the narratives of the Persephone myth and of contemporary existence. Another modernist poet of great importance inspired by myth is H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), who took several myths with suppressed women's voices (such as the stories of Eurydice or Helen of Troy) and re-wrote them from the female point of view.

H.D. does not use the juxtaposition of the contemporary and the mythical; rather, she works from within the myth and presents a version in which the female speaker recounts it from her perspective. This becomes apparent for example in her poem "Eurydice;" before, Eurydice's story had been "treated as incidental to Orpheus' narrative of loss."¹⁵ In H.D.'s poem she finally gets a chance to speak for herself; she

imparted subjectivity to the object: the female muse who had previously been seen as existing only to evoke song from the male subject. This slight shift proved to have seismic effects: for later poets like Jorie Graham, the position of subject and object could no longer appear enduringly fixed.¹⁶

H.D. uses the myth of Persephone "almost exclusively to explore disturbing issues – depression, incest, and emotional abuse."¹⁷ She sees Demeter's mysteries as a reflection of burdensome femininity based on fertility; this is the reason for Persephone's escape into death. Persephone becomes a highly ambivalent personification of young womanhood,

14 T.S.Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial* LXVV (November 1932) reproduced in Robert Deming, ed., *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970) <http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/major/Joyce_JA/Eliot_TS.htm> 23 May 2018.

15 Robin A. Morris, "Looking Back at the One Who Looks: Jorie Graham's Orpheus Sequence," *Religiologiques* 15 (1997) <http://www.joriegraham.com/morris_1997> 25 May 2018.

16 Morris, Looking Back.

17 Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2009) 125.

reacting to the social strictures presented by her mother. She is simultaneously a victim, a fallen woman and a wife;¹⁸ such a complex and malleable identity is also used by contemporary poets.

One of the most important contemporary re-workings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an anthology by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, published in 1995. Forty-two poets were commissioned to translate, re-interpret or re-write one or more episodes from the *Metamorphoses*, among them Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy and Jorie Graham. The poets produced sixty versions of roughly fifty episodes, many of them "intriguing and provocative versions of Ovid's masterpiece."¹⁹ This anthology is thus another example of myth's "perennial yet ever-changing capacity to inspire creative responses."²⁰ While there are many similarities between modernist and contemporary poets when it comes to the use of myth, the contemporary poets tend to approach myth as a palimpsest, a story already existing in several versions, which can be further adapted, transcoding it "into a different set of conventions."²¹ According to Linda Hutcheon, this adaptation then creates a doubled pleasure for the reader, since more than one text is experienced.²² In this way every poet can create a complex relationship between the mythical story as is known by the reader and the mythical story as presented by the author. And since there is no authoritative source of the Persephone myth, it can be remodelled in many ways – Glück, Dove, Graham and Stallings each present a different version of it.

18 Louis 134.

19 Betty Rose, "Tales from Ovid and After Ovid: New Metamorphoses," *The Classical World* 93.2 (1999), JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4352400>> 210.

20 Rose 210.

21 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 33.

22 Hutcheon 116.

3. Louise Glück: *Averno*

For Louise Glück, myth is a story of reconciled contradictions: an attempt to speak about life and death, love and hate in one breath. In her collection *Averno* (2006), four poems are inspired by the Persephone myth; before *Averno*, stories and myths of ancient Greece inspired the collection *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985), which “marks Glück’s first major attempt to ‘give experience the permanent form of myth,’ without attempting to make the author’s autobiographical experiences itself mythic.”²³ Since her mother often read the stories to her Glück was from a very young age “well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from illustrations, became fundamental referents.”²⁴ Most important for both *Averno* and Glück’s poetry in general is the concept of interpretation; since the mythical story is already known to most readers, “interest consequently has to center almost entirely on interpretation.”²⁵ The poet presents a familiar story in a slightly different way; thus a known conclusion of myth is no obstruction, since the important thing is the interpretation, a brand new point of view revealed. While the outline of the story remains the same, the writer is able to impose different meanings upon myth. The four poems no longer use the story of Persephone to merely explain the change of seasons or to reflect the Eleusinian mysteries: rather they try to re-interpret the original story in contemporary manner.

Far from being *Juno Inferna*, Persephone of *Averno* is fragmented, confronted by death and life as equally challenging states. Persephone’s journey through death and her return to life are subtly alluded to in the collection’s title: *Averno* is a crater lake near Naples, rumoured to be an entrance to the underworld. Glück works with her collection as if it were a form in itself, placing the poems in a meaningful pattern. The poems, therefore, form a kind of a journey: two versions of “Persephone the Wanderer” frame the collection and two “Myths” (“Myth of Innocence” and “Myth of Devotion”) are placed roughly in the middle. In this way, Glück’s individual poems “are best read in the context of a book-length collection of lyrics, spoken by competing voices in an open, dialogic relationship, or in a sequence that offers them a narrative dimension.”²⁶ The cycle of the poems mirrors Persephone’s descent to

23 Daniel Morris, *The Poetry of Louise Glück – A Thematic Introduction* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006) 5.

24 Uta Gosmann, “Psychoanalyzing Persephone: Louise Glück’s *Averno*,” *Modern Psychoanalysis* 35.2 (2010): 235, Academic Search Complete <<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=200a2900-3ac4-4573-8935-9b3f3e77a1e6%40sessionmgr4004&vid=1&hid=4108>> 5 May 2018.

25 Helen Vendler, “In the Zoo of the New,” *The New York Review of Books* 1963-2016 (October 1986) NYREV Inc. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/23/in-the-zoo-of-the-new/>> 16 April 2018.

26 Morris, *The Poetry* 1.

hell and her return to earth, as well as the change of seasons, caused by her abduction.²⁷ The individual poems contain the same themes as the whole collection: “the relations of soul to body, life to death, maternal to erotic love, and memory to forgetting.”²⁸ Persephone, who experiences death and life in equal measure, is a “Wanderer;” in her lack of belonging, she does not only set out on a journey through the underworld, but also through her own psyche.

3.1. Persephone Psychoanalyzed

One of the possible interpretations of the Persephone poems in *Averno* is based on psychoanalysis, especially since “their prosody is full of the associations, hesitations, and interruptions valued by the psychoanalyst for the openings they may provide to the analysand’s unconscious.”²⁹ Consequently Glück’s Persephone becomes the median between life/love and its refusal; she is the only one familiar enough with death to speak of it. Thus she can be understood as a soul torn between the powers of Eros and Thanatos – eagerness for life and yearning for death. In the first version of “Persephone the Wanderer,” she

is taken from her mother
and the goddess of the earth
punishes the earth—this is
consistent with what we know of human behavior.³⁰

Already in the beginning of the cycle, Glück reverses the actual mythical story by insinuating that Demeter, the source of life, is, in fact, cruel; for Demeter “losing her daughter is, above all, a threat to the mother’s absoluteness.”³¹ Thus, Persephone is supposed to be forever an extension of her mother, somebody devoted to life entirely: “[...] Regarding / incarceration, she believes / she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter” (18). The daughter refuses her mother’s stifling love and, in extension, the whole concept of Eros. She is taunted by the “rift in the human soul” (19), but the desire of a separate existence means death for her:

My soul
shattered with the strain
of trying to belong to earth – (19)

27 Gosmann 222.

28 Ann Kenniston, “Balm After Violence’: Louise Glück’s *Averno*,” *The Kenyon Review* 30.4 (2008): 178, EBSCO <<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9b8ecec70-b3bc-4fe6-8796-5bb40575d313%40sessionmgr4002&vid=1&hid=4108>> 20 April 2018.

29 Gosmann, 220.

30 Louise Glück, *Averno* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) 18. All the subsequent quotations in this chapter will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text

31 Gosmann 234.

This fatal brokenness of the soul results in tension, as life is making one deny and refuse Thanatos (symbolised by Hades); the poem continues with heavy enjambment and hyphenation suggestive of the state of death or stasis. Glück herself plainly states that the poem should be read “as an argument between the mother and the lover – / the daughter is just meat” (19). In another possible interpretation of the mother versus lover dynamic, the characters can be understood as “aspects of a dilemma” (19), comparable to the “ego, superego, id,” that is, “aspects” of the Freudian model of the mind.³²

In the second poem, “Myth of Innocence,” Persephone is seen at the beginning of myth: in a sunny meadow, in a world that does not know winter. But Glück’s Persephone craves an unspecified change, something that would rid her of the “terrible mantle of daughterliness” (50). Her wish is identified in the next stanza as a desire to be alone – since everything in nature is related to Persephone, the aloneness she desires is a separation from nature, earth, life.³³ Upon her wish “death appears, like an answer to a prayer” (50). Persephone recollects her encounter with death:

She also remembers, less clearly
the chilling insight that from this moment
she couldn’t live without him again. (50)

The beginnings of the lines are repeated as if Persephone was already beyond Lethe, forgetting: this is indicative of death. The second half of the poem mirrors the first, except that Persephone has returned from the underworld, changed. She is trying to reconcile her new self with the old one and the desire for death with her life: “*I offered myself, I wanted / to escape my body*” (51). The poem ends as it started, coming to a full circle with Persephone standing by the same pool she was taken from.

Persephone’s journey is an exploration of the self, conducted through refusal: she refuses Eros, both as a will to live and as love. This is suggested by the third poem of the cycle, “Myth of Devotion,” in which Hades’ point of view mirrors Persephone’s in “Myth of Innocence.” Both also work as structures of myth-in-myth, questioning the reality of the poem and the self. It is through the relationship of Persephone, Hades and Demeter that the reader is able to grasp what Persephone signifies – after all, she will know, in her short life, “only two adults: death and her mother” (74). Yet, understanding the characters as singularly Eros and

32 Gosmann 222.

33 Elisabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet: H. D., Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Glück* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) 174.

singularly Thanatos would be simplistic: the characteristics of Thanatos and Eros are intertwined in Hades, and his capacity to make a new earth for Persephone is a proof of that. His love also seems to be contradictory to his nature; it is the very Eros Persephone resists. “Doesn’t everybody want love?” (58) the poem asks. But love can be a destructive power, whereas death is a condition in which “*nothing can hurt you*” (59).

Demeter is also subject to the same contradiction: the life she symbolizes is constantly juxtaposed with her possibly subconscious desire to destroy what she creates. Her parts in the poem are therefore likewise characterized by heavy enjambment, which tends to appear in the sections strained with contrast between what is expected of her and what truly is her nature, most notably in the second version (or a re-vision) of “Persephone the Wanderer.” In this poem, Demeter’s position is ironic: after the disappearance of her daughter, she “circles the earth” (73) in premonition of her daughter’s perpetual journeys. While Demeter does not refuse life in itself, as her daughter does, she refuses to be a continuation of life:

As a god, she could have had
a thousand children.

We begin to see here
the deep violence of the earth
whose hostility suggests
she has no wish
to continue as a source of life. (74)

Earth’s inherent cruelty “creates the story” (74), or as Uta Gosmann suggests it is Demeter’s suppressed death drive that makes Persephone unconsciously act out her mother’s wish.³⁴

In *Averno*, Louise Glück’s technique of “giving the experience the permanent form of myth”³⁵ is perfected. While modernists like H.D. and Ezra Pound “interpreted the Greek texts as examples of a purely aesthetic model from which to build a new kind of poetry,”³⁶ Glück uses poetry to re-interpret myth as a way to approach the self. Her poetry is characterised by an “irreverent attitude toward the canons of literature, scripture, and myth.”³⁷ In *Averno* and other collections, the speakers develop their identities through myths as prior texts; these interpretations “imply the incompleteness of both [Glück’s] literary project and the texts through which she develops herself.”³⁸ In this way, the interpretations in *Averno* result in

34 Gosmann 229.

35 Vendler, *In the Zoo*.

36 Morris, *The Poetry* 231.

37 Morris, *The Poetry* 3.

38 Morris, *The Poetry* 15.

several versions of the source narrative; the transformation of the text also means a transformation of the characters and, lastly, a significant change in the meaning in the Persephone myth.

3.2. Persephone Traumatized

Another approach analyses the poems inspired by the Persephone myth as a means to deal with trauma. Unlike Glück's earlier collections, such as *Vita Nova* (1999), "the laconic tone of *Averno* implies a speaker who feels altogether shut off from everyday human experience; [s]he seems more acquainted with the silence of death... than earthly life."³⁹ Myth allows the poet the emotional distance necessary to approach upsetting narratives while still keeping these materials under control.⁴⁰ Thus Glück approaches familial relationships, her common topic, by merging or contrasting her personal experiences and mythic structures. In this way she "attempts to translate the meaning of her personal experience into a narrative of general consequence,"⁴¹ this is reflected in her use of ruptured language and chronology. Glück's *Averno*

fashions its mode of speech from just these paradoxes: the speakers of these poems are caught not in a realm without future or past, but rather in one that grants an at times confusing access to both. 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.⁴²

That Persephone is changed by violence becomes clear in the two versions of "Persephone the Wanderer;" the poems rest wavering between the opposite polarities of victimization and complicity. While Persephone is convinced that her death was willed and wished for, the changing and fragmentary points of view present a complex pattern of continuously inflicted pain. The original source of trauma cannot be located. One's dividedness, one's fundamentally broken nature is what binds Persephone both to earth and to a version of immortality.⁴³ The trauma, the source of the Persephone's wanderings, also presents a necessary element in her development. In the first of the "Wanderer" poems, death transforms the trauma, as Persephone's self-recognizing process is glimpsed in the refrain-like couplet. Nevertheless, even death, now softened to Hades, cannot cure the trauma. Persephone can only move from the wintry white of "desecration" (17) to the white of "safety" (17-18).

39 Morris, *The Poetry* 11.

40 Morris, *The Poetry* 23.

41 Morris, *The Poetry* 23.

42 Kenniston 177.

43 Kenniston 181.

But her journey is not finished: she has to return to earth and face life again. The speaker of the second version of “Persephone the Wanderer” is doubtful about the very reality of her return:

either she was not dead or
she is being used
to support a fiction – (76)

Again the fragmented rhythm and the dash convey a lack of an absolute answer. Since words like “home” (76) and “return” (76) are no longer applicable to Persephone, she could be dead; yet, since she “remembers” (76), and did not lose every connection to the world, she could be alive. As a soul with chronic “passion for expiation” (19) she asks “how can I endure the earth?” (76). What Persephone is looking for, according to the poem, is forgetting; death and afterlife are for her a consolation: “those fields of ice will be / the meadows of Elysium” (76).

Another trauma dealt with in Glück’s poetry is anorexia, “a traumatic symptom, ‘written’ onto the body.”⁴⁴ Sacrificing physicality in order to gain a new voice is a theme found in many of Glück’s poems: it is notable in her earlier re-vision of the Persephone myth, “Pomegranate”: this poem describes refusing and accepting of the pomegranate seeds from Hades. In “Myth of Innocence,” the desire for death is also connected with the fear of the body: “*I wanted / to escape my body*” (51). Persephone’s body is not entirely her own, at least according to her mother: Demeter finds it unbearable that “a part of the mother’s once unified body (the child) has now become irrevocably lost and foreign.”⁴⁵ This dislike of the body reflects the daughter’s desire to exist outside of her mother/life; since the daughter’s life is in itself a kind of trauma, Persephone possibly wishes violation upon her body in *Averno*. Her paradoxical capacity to be both dead and sentient⁴⁶ is not only a reaction to trauma, but also a source of the argumentative tone important for the collection.

In the poetry of Louise Glück the traumas of the Persephone myth can only be mitigated by the poems’ incessant interpretation of them; in this way the poet undermines and defers the trauma.⁴⁷ Trauma has an important effect upon the form of these poems: not only is their spatial and temporal frame broken down (which also allows for the interpretative and revisionary tone), the language also bears signs of deterioration, brought on by memory-loss and revisions of the story. The narrative line of the prior mythical text becomes “a format, a performance space, through which to give shape, meaning, and amplified significance to...

44 Morris, *The Poetry* 57.

45 Morris, *The Poetry* 77.

46 Kenniston 182.

47 Kenniston 185.

suffering”⁴⁸ Glück’s mythical figures often descend into a traumatic psychic landscape;⁴⁹ this allows the poet to fragment both the trauma and myth, and to recombine, repeat or revise the parts. *Averno* thus “juxtaposes and in the process links a series of mythic and autobiographical narratives of loss and survival.”⁵⁰ The mythical narratives are used as tools to ease approaching the personal aspects of motifs such as the desire for death and for life, the relationship between the mother and the daughter, the erotic love, and trauma.

48 Morris, *The Poetry* 252.

49 Morris, *The Poetry* 3.

50 Kenniston 178.

4. Rita Dove: *Mother Love*

In Rita Dove's collection *Mother Love* (1995) the Persephone myth appears in a slightly different manner: the loss of the daughter is presented as a rite of passage, an unavoidable aspect of motherhood. There are several similarities between Dove and Glück: they use the Persephone myth as a substructure for a whole collection, highlight its archetypal nature and stress the contrast between change and cyclicity. In *Mother Love*, the strain is located between the mother and the daughter, between the contemporary and the timeless. The seasons and the phases of human life are the structuring rhythms of the collection,⁵¹ but Dove constantly disturbs these rhythms. Her myth in a contemporary guise presents the dislocated and fragmentary "human effort to place a cultural template over Earth's momentum."⁵² Both the structure of the collection and the predominantly sonnet form of individual poems suggest a struggle against an imposed order. While not so tightly ordered as Glück's, "the whole sequence of sonnets, but also chains of sonnets in the interior, follow the plot of abduction, mourner's search and sojourn in hell, and eventual seasonal recurrence."⁵³ The seven parts of the collection, reminiscent of the seven pomegranate seeds Persephone ate, begin by a single poem in part I, which "introduces us to the theme of fragmentation, loss, and regeneration."⁵⁴ Part II contains Persephone's abduction, part III her journey into the underworld and part IV her life with Hades. The fifth part "initiates a movement upward, Persephone's emergence into motherhood and Demeter's (partial) reconciliation with her daughter and herself."⁵⁵ The last two parts offer further conciliation and re-enactment of the mythical journey.

Although these sections "describe a movement downward and then upward, retracing Persephone's own cyclical movement between earth and the underworld,...[they] also suggest that the journey is only half over, that we must appropriate the lessons garnered to our own life journeys."⁵⁶ *Mother Love* places the contemporary as a layer over the mythical; after all, "the contemporary voices are no more in charge than the classical. Indeed, transitions between classical and modern often occur several times within one poem."⁵⁷ Dove's mythmaking is characterized by a multi-faceted view while she examines

51 Pat Righelato, *Understanding Rita Dove* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2006) 163.

52 Righelato 163.

53 Alison Booth, "Abduction and Other Severe Pleasures: Rita Dove's *Mother Love*," *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 126, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299332>> Apr 2018> 9 April 2018.

54 Lotta Lofgren, "Partial Horror: Fragmentation and Healing in Rita Dove's *Mother Love*," *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 141, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299334>> 10 Apr 2018.

55 Lofgren 141.

56 Lofgren 141.

57 Righelato 163.

developments such as the mother's realization that she can no longer protect her daughter, and the question of whether they can return to the old bond once a fundamental change has taken place. She explores the emotions evoked by the myth, to build up narratives of the mother's loss, grief and eventual acceptance of her daughter's absence, and the daughter's choice of a new life in a different world.⁵⁸

According to Dove herself, these poems began as technical exercises "in reworking the 'outer structure of the myth' in 'contemporary settings'."⁵⁹ The formal structure of the sonnet and the constraint of the mythical theme serve as a basis for Dove's re-vision: the poems move from strictly retaining the sonnet form and the content of myth to completely reworking both, offering a range of situations and points of view, united in their depiction of mother-daughter-lover relationship, in which each is striving to break from the confinement they find themselves in.

4.1. Contemporary Mythmaking

In "Persephone, Falling" the mythical narrative retains its classical origin; it begins by Persephone picking a narcissus

when, sprung out of the earth
on his glittering terrible
carriage, he claimed his due.
It is finished. No one heard her.
No one! She had strayed from the herd.⁶⁰

In this poem, the only contemporizing voice is the mother's, warning the daughter against talking to strangers and straying; the punishment for not listening to this advice is dire: "This is how easily the pit / opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground. (9) What mistake unmakes the daughter? The original myth contains only the flower-picking, which is repeated here; but Dove imbues her narcissus with complex meaning. This flower connects the myth of Persephone to Demeter's selfish desire to keep her daughter as a part of herself, as her own reflection. Demeter's love, mother love, is never pure or simple: it can and does inculcate fear, guilt and curiosity in the daughter. Thus in the pre-abduction poems of *Mother Love*, adolescence "is a condenser of the will to be independent."⁶¹

58 Hurst 181.

59 Steven Bellin, "A Conversation with Rita Dove," *Mississippi Review* 23 (1995): 23-4, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20115415>> 15 Apr 2018.

60 Rita Dove, *Mother Love* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 9. All the subsequent quotations in this chapter will be from this edition and will be placed in parentheses in the text.

61 Righelato 149.

While in the whole collection the three main characters always remain Demeter, Persephone, and Hades, Dove presents them in various guises. Demeter, for example, is mythical and contemporary at the same time; the only stable constant is her role of the mother, otherwise she assumes various ages and races. Nevertheless, at the heart of the narrative is always the loss implicit in motherhood. In “Demeter, Waiting” Dove suggests that the grief felt by the mother upon the loss of her daughter is far from individual or time-bound. Demeter speaks in first person after Persephone disappeared; as in other versions of this myth, she refuses to keep her grief to herself, though in Dove’s poems Demeter’s violence is not implicit in her role. The mother’s violence is caused by a repeated separation from her child; it is impossible to defy the social ritual of loss, enacted generation after generation – Persephone is never entirely her mother’s. And for that, there are no easy condolences:

I will drag my grief through a winter
of my own making, refuse
any meadow that recycles itself into
hope. Shit on the cicadas, dry meteor
flash, finicky butterflies. I will wail and thrash
until the whole goddamned golden panorama freezes
over. Then I will sit down to wait for her. Yes. (56)

Winter means a refusal of the condolence presented by “meadows,” “butterflies,” “golden panorama” (56) –Demeter can be content only after she matches the natural landscape with her inner emotional landscape. Thus the crucial return from death is, in this version, not Persephone’s but Demeter’s: ⁶² until she is reconciled, she must fill the world with the “winter of her own making.”

Dove, similarly to Glück, attempts to present all the three voices that comprise the myth. In “Hades’ Pitch” the poet describes another version of the abduction; this time, it turns into a seduction. The title puns “on the colloquialism, his pitch or play for her, and his black-as-pitch, dastardly intent.”⁶³ Hades as a seducer, seen through Persephone’s eyes, is presented as “cunning, urgent and slightly pathetic.”⁶⁴ Persephone

considers
this, secretly thrilled, though she wasn’t quite
sure what he meant. He was good
with words, words that went straight to the liver.

62 Lofgren 137.

63 Righelato 158.

64 Righelato 158.

Was she falling for him out of sheer boredom—
cooped up in this anything-but-humble dive, stone
gargoyles leering and brocade drapes licked with fire?
Her ankle burns where he described it. She sighs
just as her mother aboveground stumbles, is caught
by the fetlock—bereft in an instant—
while the Great Man drives home his desire. (37)

In the moment Hades speaks to her, in the moment Persephone agrees, she is lost. This leads to one of the main questions of this myth: did Persephone desire her abduction? The collection suggests both interpretations: in some of the poems, Persephone is abducted against her will, but in some she chooses Hades, if only “out of sheer boredom” (37). Aboveground, just as Hades succeeds, Demeter is raped by Poseidon. As Pat Righelato claims, in this version, “Demeter’s rape is symbolic of the cultural rite of passage, the loss of her daughter: mother and daughter are both ‘bereft in an instant’ of their exclusive relationship, a double phallic wounding.”⁶⁵ Both the mother and the daughter are victims of the same “Great Man” (37), the power of the patriarchal society; their relationship can never be exclusive. The daughter’s rebellion hurts the mother because it asserts the power of the “Great Man” over that of a mother.

4.2. Persephone in Paris

When Dove places the myth entirely in contemporary times, she presents “the sojourn in hell as an *education sentimental* and as *illusions perdues*.”⁶⁶ Persephone reappears in “Persephone in Hell,” her underworld turned into Paris, “every anxious mother’s city of the damned.”⁶⁷ This poem, the longest in the collection, is divided into seven sections, again possibly as an equivalent to the seven pomegranate seeds eaten by Persephone.⁶⁸ While the main theme of the previous poems was the loss of the daughter, Dove does not forget to offer the daughter’s view of the events. Persephone’s identity thus becomes the main focus here as she assumes the role of an American college girl in a foreign country. At this point it seems that Paris is hell only in the mother’s eyes; for the daughter it is a “City of Lights” (23) – but for the mother the daughter’s absence constitutes hell. In the first part, Persephone recounts her Parisian habits and her attempts to blend in the city and culture that is not entirely

65 Righelato 159.

66 Booth 126.

67 Righelato 156.

68 Righelato 156.

welcoming. Persephone's rebellion against her mother and against what her mother represents places her metaphorically in a hell of nothingness:

Mother worried. Mother with her frilly ideals
gave me money to call home every day,
but she couldn't know what I was feeling;
I was doing what she didn't need to know.
I was doing everything and feeling nothing. (25)

Up until her meeting with Hades, Persephone is defined by waiting and boredom she attempts to fill with empty pleasures:

I waited for afterwards – their pale eyelids, foreheads
thrown back so the rapture could evaporate.
I don't believe I was suffering. I was curious,
mainly:
How would each one smell, how many ways could
he do it?
I was drowning in flowers. (26)

Her curiosity is based on her mother's prohibitions, and while she is glad to have personal freedom, her rebellion does not give her satisfaction.

Similarly to the characters of *Mother Love*, even hell is presented as a multifaceted place or state: it is the artistic Paris, the lack of belonging, the mother's power over the daughter or the lack thereof. What is hardest to accept in the already strained mother-daughter relationship is that "a mother's deepest dread is not that the daughter will die, but that she will survive without her – not that she will drown but that she will 'drown in sweetness.'"⁶⁹ Persephone must navigate not only the streets of Paris and its expatriate society, but also her own desires, as her own voice and that of her mother blend together to ask mockingly "*are you having a good time / are having a time at all*" (27). The life of the daughter, a stranger in a strange city, turns into dissatisfaction and disillusionment; the pit opens with the poodles of Paris as ironic hell keepers. Persephone becomes a *flanêuse*, traversing the city up to Centre Pompidou, where her cultured boredom strikes her the strongest:

I need a *divertissement*:
The next one through that gate,
woman or boy, will get

69 Lofgren 140.

the full-court press of my ennui. (30)

It is Hades who happens into this ennui: this part of the poem is written in a form of a dialogue and includes Hades' and Persephone's thoughts. Hades immediately perceives how out of place she is, but he also notes her potential. Neither of them have many illusions: in Persephone's description Hades looks "like a cynical parrot" (31). Their meeting is marked by misunderstanding, as they do not speak the other's language perfectly:

Puis-je vous offrir mes services?

"Or myself, if you are looking."

I whisper this. I'm sure she does not understand. (31)

Now Persephone's wait is over.

The seventh and the last part is the most obscure and lyrical one, as the intertwined voices of Persephone and Hades provide the connection between the modern version of myth and its Greek inspiration. This part can be read in two ways: vertically, with the left column as Persephone's voice and the right column as Hades, or horizontally across the page "so that it becomes antiphonal, cry and response, the personal subsumed into the cycle of nature, the earth drawing the seed into its darkness."⁷⁰ Dove also contemporizes myth in a slightly different manner than her modernist predecessors: while her Paris shares the ennui and diffidence contained in *The Waste Land*, the sexual relationship in *Mother Love* has an invigorating potential. Nevertheless, it is not "a grand passion but an erotic game with all manner of cultural interfaces to be negotiated."⁷¹ In "Bistro Styx," the following poem, Demeter is confronted with her daughter's relationship and lifestyle. Persephone has become a complete stranger to her; under Hades' influence she successfully becomes a part of his artistic milieu. Yet to belong there necessarily means losing something else. In the mother's eyes Persephone is a "blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole" (40):

"How's business?" I asked, and hazarded
a motherly smile to keep from crying out:
Are you content to conduct your life
as a cliché and, what's worse,

an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde? (40)

70 Righelato 158.

71 Righelato 158.

Demeter's rebuke is in stark contrast with how Persephone perceives herself, but neither of them describes the whole truth. While Demeter's voiced opinions are mild in an attempt not to alienate her daughter any further, the way she describes the dinner itself is a telling metaphor for her inner state: the Chateaubriand becomes a heart of an enemy, which the daughter eats thoughtlessly. As Persephone devours everything that is set before her, Demeter interprets her hunger for what the hell-Paris and Hades can offer with similar violence:

“Why, the aplomb with which we've managed
to support our Art”—meaning he'd convinced

her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,
faintly futuristic landscapes strewn
with car wrecks and bodies being chewed

by rabid cocker spaniels. (41)

Dove reworks the expected roles – Hades creates, and Persephone's rejuvenating role is put to question. This reversal is most obvious when Persephone devours food, while Hades refuses it: “And he never thinks of food. I wish / I didn't have to plead with him to eat” (42). “Bistro Styx” thus examines the question of female appetite and “makes the connection between hunger, female sexuality and speech explicit.”⁷² Hell-Paris is, after all, a place of desire; the daughter metaphorically consumes life:

Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,
speared each tear-shaped lavalier
and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth.
Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted

vines and sun poured down out of the south.
“But are you happy?” Fearing, I whispered it
quickly. “What? You know, Mother”—

she bit into the starry rose of a fig—
“one really should try the fruit here.”

I've lost her, I thought, and called for the bill. (42)

Persephone completely refuses her mother's life-giver role: she consumes the products of the earth (or the earth-goddess) but has no connection to their origins. Demeter's “nowhere” (42)

72 Hurst 184.

is the sun-lit existence of the earth and her goddess-self; Persephone's "here" (42) is the underworld, among the grey, sooty streets of Paris – not even a scenery, but rather a stasis. Persephone, however, does not lose her identity in this place, only the part of it instilled by her mother, finally severing the last connection between them. Even while Dove presents a contemporary version of the Persephone myth and provides the reader with various aspects of its narrative, the two basic motifs behind it remain the same: the connections between sexuality, brutality, and fertility⁷³ and the daughter's leaving of home as a rite of passage.

Rita Dove's *Mother Love* is preoccupied with changing states, with metamorphosis that "infects the characters not only with the desire to move beyond the present state but also with a longing to recover an earlier phase that will somehow bring them to a beginning again."⁷⁴ Dove presents the three characters in a variety of roles and partial identities, locating the poems' subject not as essentially African American or female; this freedom is reflected in the varying amounts of re-vision apparent in the myth, revealing and working with the underlying themes of identity, desire, rebellion and motherhood. As Pat Righelato states,

[t]hese contemporary elements are in the ascendancy, yet they metamorphose without gradation into the classical. Mythology, in *Mother Love*, is thus at once the earth's cycle, the sensual heat of eroticism, but also the cultural rite of passage, the mother deserted for the lover, and the antique and the contemporary compacted.⁷⁵

Dove simultaneously makes use of the "universality" of Western mythology and actively undermines it by the fragmented voices of this collection. In this way the poems constitute both homage and a small rebellion, in form and content. Persephone, Demeter and Hades each strive to break from their assigned roles, just as the poet repeatedly undermines the formal and metric expectation of the sonnet; for Rita Dove, *Mother Love* can mean "'Protection,' tutelage in fatal gender roles, possessive grief, devouring rage, deceptive or strategic calm."⁷⁶

73 Righelato 151.

74 Righelato 162.

75 Righelato 158.

76Booth 128.

5. Jorie Graham: *The End of Beauty*

In Jorie Graham's *The End of Beauty* (1987) myth takes a form of a series of fragments, in which the subject assumes various roles and is presented from various points of view at once in what resembles a Cubist picture or a film montage. As Thomas Gardner noted, "[v]isual art, mythology, history, and philosophy are central to Graham's work...the influences of her mother, a sculptor, and father, a journalist, her tri-lingual upbringing, and her early immersion in European culture are all evident in her poetry."⁷⁷ *The End of Beauty* is the first collection to contain Graham's characteristic "long, flexible line...focused definitively on consequence rather than closure."⁷⁸ The line is often taken as a unit of sense. The poet also "largely abandoned the metaphoric and iconic methods, as well as the slow, winding syntax."⁷⁹ This collection contains a single poem inspired by the Persephone myth, "Self-portrait as Demeter and Persephone." In this poem and in her poetry in general, Graham often uses a contrast between long and short lines, spacing and indentation to explore the tensions between the real and the mystical.⁸⁰ Another important facet of her specific form is the use of numbered sections that contain fragments of description, utterance or thought; they are often "seemingly unrelated,"⁸¹ but together form a mosaic – the poem.

Graham presents myth not only as something personal, a "self-portrait," but also as a series of snapshots, each from a different angle and at a different point of the story: this transports the poem from the strictly personal to a more general level of meaning. Thus the Persephone myth becomes, rather than a narrative explaining the change of seasons or an allegory of a mother-daughter relationship, what Bonnie Costello called an "allegory of consciousness."⁸² This mythical self-portrait "render[s] the lyric poet's psyche not as an integrated unit, but as a variety of dramatic tensions and repeated gestures. [...] Within these paradigms, Graham explores questions of freedom and necessity, of desire and resistance."⁸³ Graham uses the Persephone myth as a framework in a different way than the two previous poets, Louise Glück and Rita Dove: for Graham, the three characters are similarly depersonalised as in Glück's poetry, but they do not represent three completely separate

77 Thomas Gardner, "Jorie Graham, The Art of Poetry no. 85," *The Paris Review* 165 (2003) <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/263/jorie-graham-the-art-of-poetry-no-85-jorie-graham>> 23 April 2018.

78 Gardner.

79 Bonnie Costello, "The Big Hunger," *The New Republic* (1992) <http://www.joriegraham.com/costello_1992> 25 April 2018.

80 Gardner.

81 Gardner.

82 Costello.

83 Costello.

figures. Rather, each seems to be an aspect of a single consciousness, that of the lyrical subject, who is at the same time the daughter and the mother, occasionally even the lover. While Graham's fragmentary descriptions form a more or less united whole, "at times, the poet offers a kind of 'close' reading which requires readers both to participate in the poem by filling in the blank and for Graham to present her own inability to express the not-yet-conceivable."⁸⁴

5.1. Persephone Becomes Demeter

"Self-portrait as Demeter and Persephone" begins by setting up another motif besides the Greek myth in borrowing the image of a burning bush. This bush "has three faces,"⁸⁵ presumably the three characters of the Persephone myth; the speaker, though unidentified, is one of them. In this particular trinity, the only character mentioned overtly is the mother, who is also "the other" (59) and who, as Demeter, is "the one whose grief is the visible world / a wound she must keep open by beginning and beginning" (59). Graham turns the rudiment of the myth of Persephone, the change of seasons, to a whole world *sustained* by Demeter's grief; like the previous poets, Graham also highlights the cyclical nature of the mythological narrative. The second character is described merely as "the hand that takes" (59). The language of Graham's poetry is often far from clear; in fact, it tends to be rather "opaque, obscure, and syntactically confusing; and no matter how the syntactical confusion is reconciled, the reader is unable to find any certain argument concerning meaning in the literature."⁸⁶ This obscurity is due not only on Graham's rhythm-subjected syntax, but also to the confusion of the often unidentified voices in the poem; such is the case of the second part, presented by a voice speaking to Demeter: "Oh but you have to learn to let her go you said / out into the open field through the waiting the waving grasses" (59). In Graham's poem Persephone is not in a field of narcissi, but in

that drastic field of distinctions
each new possibility molting of the back of the one motion, creation,
until there are so many truths each one its own color
it's a flower the picking of which would open the world
the mouth over the unsaid whispering loves me not loves me (59)

84 Gardner.

85 Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty* (Hopewell: Ecco Press: 1987) 59. All the subsequent quotations in this chapter will be from this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

86 Brandon Lussier, "Understanding Jorie Graham," *The California Journal of Poetics* <<http://www.californiapoetics.org/criticism/994/understanding-jorie-graham>> 25 April 2018.

This “field of distinctions” (59) does not belong to the physical or the natural. For the poet, daughterhood means being placed among an ever-growing number of possibilities: picking one, the right one, may result in the opening of the world (or the pit). The speaker’s voice now merges with Demeter and becomes “us,” wondering whether Persephone can “still find the way the cracks are small enough” (59). Just as Glück stresses the daughter as a part of the mother’s body and Dove her being a part of the mother’s life, Graham envisions Persephone as a part of Demeter’s mind or consciousness. Such a connection may be based on the two states following each other: the mother was once a daughter and the daughter may become a mother. The subject thus does not have a separate identity, but becomes the mother and the daughter simultaneously, so that the two voices intertwine mid-verse or even mid-line. Demeter/Persephone is both “up here” (59) and “underneath” (60): however, the earth is “the knowable” (59), while hell is described as “the absence of the past” (60). Momentarily, the voices are separated: Demeter, confused in her loss, is looking for her daughter in “the miles stretched out to tempt the mind into them;” (60) Persephone, however, is “gone into the fire” (60):

where you pay what you owe then you want to pay more
 She took off the waiting she stood before him without nouns
 He held her where are the images he said we will destroy them
 you are in hell now there is no beginning

the outlines is a creature that will blur you will forget him

as for motive that shapeliness let us splinter it let us scatter it (60)

For all the three poets hell constitutes a loss or a lack; in “Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” Persephone loses her “waiting” (60). Graham’s hell is characterized by a lack of nouns – this does not mean that hell is a dynamic, verbal space; rather, the lack of images creates a blankness that is impossible to fill with action. Being in the underworld thus becomes automatism: “there is no reason for this that’s what your body is for” (60). Losing nouns and with them the images means losing the very self the poet “portraits” – the subject’s consciousness is now split; Persephone crossed the Styx and forgot. This split, however, affects not only the daughter, but also the mother:

She watched the smoke where it began what it left off

What will I recognize it to have been she thought
smoke smoke her fingers her eyes like static all over it
Surely I can find it the point of departure she put her hand in (60)

After these four lines the identity of the speaker blurs again: the poem seems to be describing both Demeter outside and Persephone in hell, each of them “sealed off” (60) in their respective positions:

It pushed back against her it was hell she could finally lean
It was the given and it was finally given

or is it, is it...It was then she remembered

slit hum mob wing of

and you what did you do? For a long time I (61)

In *The End of Beauty* the importance lies in the minute description or the lack thereof: it is hell that makes description impossible and fragmentises the already fragmented self even further. Thus, according to Helen Vendler:

[i]t is the gaze, rather than the breath, that seems to me Graham’s fundamental measure in the numbered-line poems. By this choice of the gaze over the breath, Graham redefines utterance; and what utterance becomes is the tracking of the gaze, quantum-percept by quantum-percept, bundle by bundle.⁸⁷

Consequently this part of the poem can be articulated either by Demeter or Persephone; both of them, however, refuse the traumatic memory, the loss of the other that is the loss of the self – “It was then she remembered and looked the other way” (61). Graham’s fragmentary lines never offer answers to the questions they raise; representing human experience “as accurately as possible through literary style”⁸⁸ is not her goal. Language can reflect the world only partially and imperfectly so that “it can only get in the way of a true understanding of the world.”⁸⁹

87 Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1995) 112.

88 Lussier.

89 Lussier.

5.2. The Greek Burning Bush

Persephone's position in hell and her relationship with Hades differ strongly from the three previous versions of myth: "And what does he ask of you, only to fear Him" (61). Since the "burning bush" (59) in the beginning of the poem already established a Judaeo-Christian context, "he" may represent either Hades or God. Despite the fact that in these fragments the poet adopts a particularly prophetic tone, the scenario she describes is ultimately as inevitable as it was for Glück and Dove. Still in hell, Persephone

saw the made grieving above her like a mother or winter
the great gap grieving all form and shadow
heard the god of the place lean down and describe the grief:
and he shall be to thee in stead of a mouth and thou shalt be to him
in stead of God

(why should she come back why should she begin again) (61)

Demeter's grief is the winter, and Hades describes it to Persephone in words of Exodus 4:16, adding to the confusion of voices a further confusion of mythologies. In the context of the poem these two lines resemble vows of a kind: Hades speaks for Persephone, since she relinquished her selfhood and Persephone becomes an object of worship for him. The Judeo-Christian mythological frame is then repeated in the same image of the burning bush, only slightly shifted: "He said Look this is the burning bush we're in it it has two faces" (62). The question is who disappears from the bush: either the Demeter-part is gone, or the two voices (Persephone and Demeter) merge together to create a complete self. This poem "does not build an identity or construct a worldview for the reader or enter into and interpret with well-reasoned comparison."⁹⁰ Thus it becomes a space "where nothing makes sense—nothing coheres into meaningful argument and nothing bonds together to form a unitary identity.... There is no—nor can be there ever be—revelation."⁹¹

When Persephone resurfaces, no change is apparent at first: "it's all the same it's always been so why try" (62). The change unfolds inside Persephone; she seems to be made complete:

she felt her mother in her body it was easy not to worry
the light flayed her she was a new woman she could inhabit a shape
Minutes go in Words come out A machine for waiting (62)

90 Lussier.

91 Lussier.

Persephone is “a new woman” (62), inhabiting a “shape” (62) instead of a “possibility” (59). Nevertheless, Graham undermines the positive view of the return: the re-connection of Demeter and Persephone means that Persephone is subject to the passage of time; she is always waiting for the other part of her existence. On the other hand, she now has the ability to describe, to use images and metaphors:

The first thing she saw when she surfaced was the wind
wrapping like a body round the stiff stripped trees
that would bend more deeply into that love if they could
to accompany its eagerness young wind its rage
if they weren't so perfect if they weren't so shorn (62)

Returning to earth means experiencing love and cruelty, and also being able to voice them: the subject describes the sort of ascetic, encompassing, and submissive love that once again serves to confuse the two mythical frameworks of the poem. Nevertheless, it is the Persephone myth that allows the poet to deal more directly with “an idea that has always preoccupied her: the sense of an abiding wholeness behind a ‘veil’ or ‘shroud’ that is ripped to form a ‘storyline,’ to divide experience into ‘minutes,’ to frame it in limited ‘points of view.’”⁹² Graham’s form fragments myth, the narrative that is supposed to aid in understanding the world’s fragmentation and in finally moving past this world into the sacred; as Costello claims, the “poet of myth is more concerned to represent intense vision than achieved wisdom. And this intensity is typographically expressed: ‘questions, dashes, ellipses, parentheses abound, and lines reach into margins.’”⁹³

The last part of the poem becomes a series of disjointed images, describing scenes and emotions, the language of which “incorporates ever smaller increments of experience in each of its provisional gestures towards formulation.”⁹⁴ The question this form seems to pose is whether any of these gestures is satisfactory; this is never answered.⁹⁵ The spatial and temporal connections between the various parts are finally completely lost:

15

another body, exploded, all leafiness, unimaginable

16

by which to be forgiven by which to suffer completely this wind (63)

92 Costello.

93 Costello.

94 Vendler, *The Given* 115.

95 Vendler, *The Given* 115.

As can be seen from these numbered fragments, Graham's poetry attempts to create suspension, not closure. The poet defers both clear interpretation and conclusion "by a series of ever-approaching asymptotic gestures, each one of them numbered, and each advancing the plot by a micro-measure."⁹⁶ Thus the form and the content enrich each other: the long horizontal line contains in turn the long vertical sentence,⁹⁷ creating a line that "has not yet tethered itself to shape, to ending, to decision."⁹⁸ "Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone" may become an occasion for the poet's self-portraiture,⁹⁹ but this self cannot be easily grasped.

The personal lyric tends to represent the self as socially marked, but the self of *The End of Beauty* is rather an impersonal consciousness: "while personal circumstance is acknowledged to underlie the awakening consciousness... [the poems'] restless search drives them to ranges of feeling and speech where it really does not matter whether one is male or female, black or white."¹⁰⁰ This is apparent even in the myth-inspired "Self-Portrait," where the voices of Persephone, Demeter and Hades intertwine and merge to the point of becoming undistinguishable. Yet there are moments of clear distinction, from which an awareness of the split between the subject and the other (the mother and the daughter, in this case) arises; Kristeva would label this the thetic break, "which produces narrative and myth."¹⁰¹ The lyrical subject thus inhabits three identities, the mother, the daughter, and the lover, acknowledging that the separation between them is not entirely clear and largely connected with the passage of time. These fluid identity boundaries "make moments of transcendence possible."¹⁰² For Graham, the Persephone myth is not modernized as a drama enacted between three separate characters, but as a process contained within the self: the daughter may get temporarily lost in "the field of possibilities" (59) and wind up in hell, devoid of all possibilities; nevertheless, she returns as a "new woman" (62), combining the voices of hell and earth, switching identities and yet bound to constant repetitions of her journeys. The poem which is comprised of fragments and gestures can never resolve itself; that, however, does not impede the particular reflection of reality it contains. As Graham herself said:

96 Helen Vendler, "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess," *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) <http://www.joriegraham.com/vendler_moment_1995> 18 April 2018.

97 Lussier.

98 Vendler, *The Moment of Excess*.

99 Willard Spiegleman, "Jorie Graham Looking," *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, ed. J. Hedley et al. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009) 187.

100 Helen Vendler, "Ascent Into Limbo," *The New Republic* (1994) <http://www.joriegraham.com/vendler_1994> 23 April 2018.

101 Morris, *Looking Back*.

102 Morris, *Looking Back*.

I feel... [the myths] are, at all times, happening. There are moments when the gesture of Eve towards Adam occurs within the psyche, for example, that sudden turn towards self-transformation, death, form. We have, over the years, found other terms for those motions of the spirit – biological terms, sociological terms, religious terms. But the mythological figures for those actions seem to me more useful because less reductive; more complex; more inclusive – not to mention more mysterious.¹⁰³

The End of Beauty presents the Persephone myth as an *integumentum*, a covering for another story, the meaning of which can be revealed through re-interpreting myth of the poem; the contemporary version in a sense does not add anything modern to myth, only unveils a new meaning contained therein. In this manner, Graham's version is similar to Glück's, who also takes the Persephone myth as a narrative describing a psychological archetype, a strain between life and the death drive. Each of the three above mentioned poets interpret the Persephone myth as a quest for selfhood; it is possible to define this approach by Jung's concept of individuation as "the development of the psychological individual as a differentiated being from the general collective psychology."¹⁰⁴ Yet the poets present this individuation (and Persephone's selfhood) in a different manner. In *Averno*, Persephone must reconcile the opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos; in *Mother Love* she has to separate herself from Demeter and navigate the modern hell of Paris on her own. The Persephone of *The End of Beauty* must harmonize the aspects that her self contains, as she is both the mother and the daughter. In all the three cases it is her sojourn in hell that allows her to define herself as a person.

103 Thomas Gardner, "An Interview with Jorie Graham," *Regions of Unlikeness: Explaining Contemporary Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1999) <http://www.joriegraham.com/gardner_interview_1999> 24 April 2018.

104 Carl Jung, *The Collected Works of C.Jung, Volume 6: Psychological Types* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 448.

6. A.E. Stallings: *Archaic Smile*

A.E. Stallings, the youngest of the four poets, places her collection *Archaic Smile* (1999) firmly between the ancient and the modern, the disaster and the miracle: the very first poem “A Postcard from Greece,” articulates this position by describing the poet’s nearly fatal car crash by the side of an ancient temple. The neoclassical poems of this collection “usually in the form of dramatic monologues, are nearly always delivered by, or are about the plights of, women.”¹⁰⁵ In the two poems inspired by the Persephone myth, “Hades Welcomes His Bride” and “Persephone Writes a Letter Home” Stallings remains closer to the ancient Greek version than the previous poets; nonetheless, she also includes several twists, namely the extended and differing viewpoints of Hades and Persephone and their respective roles, the description of the underworld and the life-death dichotomy as the basis of the myth of Persephone. The last point is the most important change: Stallings’ Persephone does not ever return to earth – this seems to plunge the world into perpetual winter. As Stallings herself explains: “[M]y Persephone doesn’t ever leave hell—and as a result there are no changes of the seasons [...] But she is sometimes depicted as being the Queen of the Dead, and as such, I don’t really see her as executing her royal duties only part time.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Demeter does not figure in this version of myth, unlike in the previous re-interpretations (especially those of Dove and Garham), where the mother-daughter relationship was of the utmost importance; the focus is shifted to the relationship of Persephone and Hades, of death and the individual. Thus Stallings does not describe Persephone’s journeying between the earth and the underworld, but her settling into death and accepting her role as the Queen of the Dead, which is something no ancient version of the Persephone myth mentions.

6.1. “Hades Welcomes His Bride”

In “Hades Welcomes His Bride,” Hades begins by addressing Persephone as a “child” (4), establishing the mutual misunderstanding that is to be the premise of the whole poem. Not only is this address infantilizing, but it prevents Persephone from responding as an equal, and her voice is indeed completely missing through the whole poem. As Hades leads her further to the underworld he continues to lecture her:

105 Erica MacAlpine, “‘To Catch the Last Applause:’ The Poetry of A.E. Stallings,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 33 (2013): 396. ProQuest <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:criticism:R04892562:0&rft.accountid=15618> 11 May 2018.

106 A.E. Stallings, “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother,” *Eratoshpere: A Forum of Able Muse* (2001) <<https://www.ablemuse.com/erato/showthread.php?t=5339>> 8 May 2018.

Here you must learn
Directions through your fingertips and feet
And map them in your mind. I think some shapes
Will gradually appear.¹⁰⁷ (4)

Stallings' hell is characterized by its position underground: it is not a place of punishment, but rather a set of winding mole-tunnels, simultaneously close and far from the landscape of Persephone's previous existence. It is not pleasant, but dark, damp and full of roots; yet Hades attempts to make Persephone feel welcome in a series of misjudgements and misunderstandings:

And in this hall will sit our throne,
And here you shall be queen, my dear, the queen,
Of all men ever to be born. No smile?
Well, some solemnity befits a queen. (4)

Whatever Hades creates for his love misfires spectacularly, imbuing the poem with black humour and turning it into a dark satire on marriage. Since her new throne is unlike any Persephone imagined, it cannot reflect her desires, even if it will suit her "timid beauty and pale throat" (4). The poem only describes Persephone's nonverbal reactions through Hades, so that he becomes a singularly overwhelming figure, dominating the whole poem and suggesting that Persephone belongs entirely to Death now; she cannot protest. When Hades shows her a room specifically for her "diversion" (4), his efforts are not met with appreciation: the air in the room may be "dry and easy to breathe" (4), but the loom inside, with its all black shroud-silks, seems rather like a horror than a pleasure, even though Hades is assured of his gift's success: "Such pictures you shall weave! Such tapestries!" (4). Another of his gifts is even more garish: he presents Persephone with three servants, who shall be her "friends and loyal maids" (4) – except "[t]hey have / Not mouth nor eyes and cannot thus speak ill / Of you" (4). The misunderstandings escalate when Hades leads Persephone to their bedroom, again decorated specifically for her:

I had it specially made after great thought
So you would feel at home. I had the ceiling
Painted to recall some evening sky –
But without the garish stars and lurid moon.
What? That stark shape crouching in the corner?
Sweet, that is to be out bed. Our bed.

107 A.E. Stallings, *Archaic Smile* (Evansville: The University of Evansville Press, 1999) 4. The subsequent quotations in this chapter will be from this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

Ah! Your hand is trembling! I fear
There is, as yet, too much pulse in it. (4-5)

His attempt at a night sky without moon or stars results in a black ceiling; but the centrepiece, the bed, raises the most violent reaction; even Hades does not deny the possible danger in the object, describing it as “stark” (4) and “crouching” (4). Yet he dismisses Persephone’s fear as being still too full of life and unaccustomed to his kind of existence. Whether the afterlife can be something to get used to is partially answered by Stallings’ next poem.

6.2. “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother”

“Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother” is a companion piece, Persephone’s point of view to mirror that of Hades: together, they describe her experience of the Underworld.¹⁰⁸ Persephone’s “letter” begins by describing hell:

First—hell is not so far underground—
My hair gets tangled in the roots of trees
& I can just make out the crunch of footsteps,
The pop of acorns falling, or the chime
Of a shovel squaring a fresh grave or turning
Up the tulip bulbs for separation. (6)

Hell is not placed in some faraway region but literally “five feet under,” too close for comfort; it is disturbed by the life aboveground, but whether this works the other way around remains uncertain. Stallings mentions the personal impulse behind her description of the underworld: “And it just now occurs to me that some of the details may result from the fact that at the time I was living in a dark basement apartment, and was in fact just below the earth myself.”¹⁰⁹ The dead seem to be simultaneously physically very close and mentally far away from the living: “The dead are just as dull as you would imagine. / They evolve like the burrowing animals” (6). Persephone and Hades are the only creatures with awareness of something else than this underground existence, and Persephone desperately tries to learn some news from the above. However, she is ultimately unsuccessful: “Alas, the burrowing animals have dim eyesight. / They are useless for news of the upper world” (6). Nonetheless she describes the dead, just as useless aboveground as the animals, with a sort of dark, but soft humour, permeating the whole poem:

108 Stallings, *Persephone Writes*.

109 Stallings, *Persephone Writes*.

They may roam abroad sometimes—but just at night—
 They can only tell me if there was a moon.
 Again and again, moth-like, they are duped
 By any beckoning flame—lamps and candles.
 They come back startled & singed, sucking their fingers,
 Happy the dirt is cool and dense and blind.
 They are silly & grateful and don't remember anything.
 I have tried to tell them stories, but they cannot attend.
 They pester you like children for the wrong details—
 How long were his fingernails? Did she wear shoes?
 How much did they eat for breakfast? What is snow?
 And then they pay no attention to the answers. (6)

Persephone's separation from her previous existence is absolute: she and the dead have no language in common, since she as a goddess and the Queen of the Underworld still remembers her previous life. The dead, however, do not have this ability. Through the whole letter-poem Persephone attempts to maintain a light tone, trying to convince not exactly her mother, but rather herself that her death-existence is not as bad as it may look. The relationship with her husband, as suggested by the first poem, is not ideal; he, too, "neither listens nor speaks" (6). "But here there is no fodder for small talk" (6) explains Persephone: "The weather is always the same. Nothing happens" (6). The smallest experiences become extremely important: "Though at times I feel the trees, rocking in place / Like grief, clenching the dirt with tortuous toes" (6). Stallings reverses the expected perspective: it is not Persephone who is grieved by Demeter, but Persephone who grieves¹¹⁰ her previous life, her current state and the loss of her mother. Yet Persephone constantly undermines this misery with humour, even when she complains about the fare in hell ("raw beets & turnips" and "mud-filtered rain" (7)) and when she is uncomfortable among the ever expanding numbers of the dead, who "breed like the bulbs of daffodils" (7).

The next stanza becomes even more personal as she addresses Demeter:

I miss you and think about you often.
 Please send flowers. I am forgetting them.
 If I yank them down by the roots, they lose their petals
 And smell of compost. Though I try to describe
 Their color and fragrance, no one here believes me. (7)

110 Stallings, Persephone Writes.

Nevertheless, Persephone is also subject to forgetting: her efforts to renew the connection to life are unsuccessful. She, however, quickly reverses her complaint: “no dog is so loyal as the dead” (7), she claims, as if that should give her some satisfaction. Upon Hades she writes

Plus, my husband is a kind, kind master;
He asks nothing of us, nothing, nothing at all—
Thus fall changes to winter, winter to fall,
While we learn idleness, a difficult lesson. (7)

The change of seasons is reduced to winter; the afterlife is dark, constrained, and empty of stimuli. The irony of Persephone’s letter-writing becomes apparent in the last stanza:

He does not understand why I write letters.
He says that you will never get them. True—
Mulched-leaf paper sticks together, then rots;
No ink but blood, and it turns brown like the leaves.
He found my stash of letters, for I had hid it,
Thinking he'd be angry. But he never angers.
He took my hands in his hands, my shredded fingers
Which I have sliced for ink, thin paper cuts.
My effort is futile, he says, and doesn't forbid it. (7)

The rift between life and death is rendered more absolute than in the poems of Glück, Graham and Dove: “even the letter rots, and can communicate nothing.”¹¹¹ Persephone not only cannot leave hell, she has no means of contacting her mother (as Dove’s Persephone, for example, has). On the other hand, her relationship with Hades, while still not ideal, seems slightly better than Glück or Dove would have it; even though he has no understanding for the kind of life Persephone is used to, he does not blame her for remembering or desiring it. Rather, after the initial misunderstandings of the first poem, he becomes even gentle. Persephone’s effort to renew the connection with the world outside is futile and painful, yet seems necessary as an aid in keeping her individuality; Stallings shifts the narrative of myth from the cyclical nature of the seasons and relationship of Persephone and Demeter to Persephone’s relationship to Hades and to death (though it must be noted that the two can blur together at times).

The difference of *Archaic Smile* lies not only in its strict formalism, but also in the way it handles the Persephone myth. The two above-mentioned poems are written in unrhymed iambic pentameter and “Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother” is ordered in stanzas with varying number of lines. Stallings views her use of traditional form instead of

111 Stallings, Persephone Writes.

free verse as necessary for her poetics: “I like to say that form is not about having control, but giving up control, allowing other forces into the poem. Absolute liberty is paralyzing for me.”¹¹² Her views as regards the form are reflected in her approach to the content: as a classically educated poet, she takes the premise of the Persephone myth as the basis of her poetry while shifting the expected point of view and thus revealing a wider potential in the mythological narrative. In this case, her main themes are love, death and mortality, presented with a particularly humorous twist. Stallings claims that her re-writing of the myth actually stems from her classical education:

One thing about studying the classics is that you realize there is no one version of a myth. Bullfinch’s *Mythology* tells us there is a myth, but that just isn’t true. Homer may have one version, Ovid another version; Virgil still another version, and the classical authors clearly felt free to change the myths to suit their own purposes. They didn’t consider them cast in stone or untouchable, so you get the impression you can be free, too, to do with the characters what you want to. Sometimes when I want to write something personal, I’ll write through a persona; then it’s neither personal nor mythical, and it sort of becomes a combination of the two things, and if I’m trying to write about the myth, I’ll deliberately search for a wholly different point of view because the traditional one doesn’t make for a very interesting poem.¹¹³

Myths are by their nature subject to constant rewriting and re-interpretation: modern voices simply add another facet to the mythical narratives. In the case of Stallings, poems inspired by mythology recur through her *œuvre*: her latest collection, *Olives* (2012), returns to the Persephone myth. These later poems are “personal, almost psychoanalytic; they could be mistaken for Louise Glück’s Persephone poems in *Averno* – if, that is, Glück had a penchant for rhyme and an even sharper tongue.”¹¹⁴ The range of possible interpretations included in the mythical narrative results in poetry as different as that of Dove, Glück, Graham and Stallings, among many other contemporary voices who take the Persephone myth as their inspiration.

112 Ryan Gunn, “Women in Form: A.E.Stallings,” *Tupelo Quarterly* (2014)
<<http://www.tupeloquarterly.com/women-in-form-ae-stallings/>> 9 May 2018.

113 Ginger Murchison, “Interview with A.E.Stallings,” *The Cortland Review* 19 (2002)
<<http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/19/stallings19.html>> 9 May 2018.

114 MacAlpine 409.

Conclusion

The classical tradition has been an important source of inspiration through the whole history of Western literature; women writers, however, began to widely reclaim this tradition only in the twentieth century. This reclamation was completed by contemporary women poets. Using mythological texts in their work proves to be one of the most important aspects of this process; for women writers, “transgressing into the territory of the classical tradition means changing that territory by making it their own, by taking liberties with the ancient texts, challenging or subverting them, but also by uncovering hitherto invisible meanings.”¹¹⁵ The main concern of this thesis was such revisionism: it analysed mythology-inspired poetry of four contemporary American women poets, Louise Glück, Rita Dove, Jorie Graham and A.E.Stallings. The four poets “draw attention to the discrepancies between traditional concepts and the conscious mental and emotional activity of female re-vision”¹¹⁶ of the myth of Persephone. This myth seems to be particularly prevailing in female re-writing: it describes a mother-daughter relationship, the contrasting states of life and death, the questions of desire and trauma – these themes, among many other, were explored not only by the four above mentioned poets, but also by Carolyn Kizer, Daniella Michaelini, Shara McCallum, Ruth Fainlight, Eavan Boland, Alicia Ostriker, Meghan O’Rourke, Carl Ann Duffy, Anne Carson and many other lesser known women writers. The great number of contemporary American, British, Irish, and Canadian poets who re-interpret the Persephone myth in their poetry clearly proves its lasting influence.

Generally, these contemporary alternative versions are derived from two basic texts, “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; even these two source-texts show a great deal of variation in how they narrate the Persephone myth and in what aspects of it they highlight. “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” was possibly intended to explain the source of Eleusinian mysteries, thus it is more centred on Demeter and her reaction to Persephone’s abduction. *Metamorphoses*, on the other hand, describe Persephone’s sojourn in hell in her own words, providing the inspiration for the increased importance of Persephone’s point of view in contemporary poetry. After the introduction of the main sources of this myth, the second chapter provides a short survey of the revision of myth in 20th century poetry, with emphasis upon women poets.

115 Elena Theodorakopoulos, “Women’s writing and the classical tradition,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 4.2, (2012) Oxford Academic Journals <<https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/cls016>> 14 May 2018.

116 Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” *Signs*, 8.1 (1982):87 JSTOR <www.jstor.org/stable/3173482> 17 May 2018.

Third chapter analysed the Persephone poems of Louise Glück, found in her collection *Averno*. Glück makes use of the whole collection as a form in itself, and the four poems therein chart Persephone's descend to the underworld and her return back to earth. Since psychological conflict is at heart of Glück's Persephone poems, they can be interpreted on the basis of psychoanalysis, with Demeter and Hades characterised as opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos. The Persephone myth thus becomes a depersonalized account of the forces of life and death, rendered through mythical personas or a similarly depersonalized account of trauma. Persephone's trauma is located outside Hades, and rests rather in her strained relationship to her mother and her equally strained relationship to life. In *Averno* Demeter, Hades, and Persephone enter the text as separate voices to reveal or obscure their roles in the narrative; Glück renders myth highly ambiguous by presenting it as a reflection of psychological, subconscious conflict, a quest for selfhood that results in constant "wandering" between life and death.

For Rita Dove, as the name of her collection *Mother Love* suggests, the conflict is located in the relationship between the mother and the daughter. The whole collection describes such a relationship based on the myth of Persephone; while the poems may seem to be traditional in both theme and form, Dove actively reworks the tradition by setting myth in contemporary time and by disrupting the structure of the sonnet. Dove's dialogue with tradition may be partially informed by her African-American identity: for example, her Demeter often takes guises of different age or race. By setting her version mostly in Paris, Dove opens the question of belonging to a certain culture and lifestyle. What Demeter must face is the inevitable separation from the child; Dove's version thus concentrates on social rites of motherhood and the daughter's search for an individual identity. Jorie Graham, in her collection *The End of Beauty*, presents the Persephone myth as a "self-portrait;" but rather than being a personal lyric, the poem is a set of fragments in which the subject assumes various roles. Graham is thus able to present the Persephone myth from various points of view at once in what resembles a film montage. The depersonalization on the level of characters is also apparent and similar to that of Louise Glück. In this case, however, the characters do not represent three completely separate voices, but they seem to be aspects of a single consciousness, so that the lyrical subject can be the daughter and the mother at the same time. The voices of Persephone, Demeter, and Hades often intertwine and merge to the point of becoming undistinguishable: the separation between the three identities of the subject seems to be based solely on the perception of time. Thus Graham approaches the Persephone myth

as “a drama of creative interaction—a staging of encounters—between consciousness and its other.”¹¹⁷

The last poet analysed in this thesis is A.E.Stallings, whose collection *Archaic Smile* differs from the previous ones mainly in its use of traditional form. It is worth noting that the four so formally different poets are connected in the ways they re-write the Persephone myth; they all use the motif of separation and search as the basis of their re-interpretations. In Stallings’ version, the separation between Persephone and Demeter is complete: Persephone never leaves the underworld. While Stallings can be in a sense described as the most traditional of the four poets, she also reworks the myth after her own taste. She presents the barrier between Hades and Persephone as an utter misunderstanding, resulting in several humorous, even ironic situations. Stallings also shifts the respective roles of Demeter and Persephone: it is Persephone who is grieving. Demeter does not appear in the *Archaic Smile* and so the main importance is afforded to the relationship between Hades and Persephone. Even though Louise Glück, Rita Dove Jorie Graham and A.E.Stallings all use the same myth as the basis of their poems, there are manifold convergent and divergent aspects in their respective poetics. Disregarding the obvious differences in style and form, the main contrast between the poets is in the meaning of myth: each works with a different aspect of Persephone’s story. Nevertheless, they all at least partially describe Persephone’s individuation as a result of her separation from Demeter. Persephone always enters hell and for a season or eternity inhabits it as a space of loss.

The complex interplay of love and loss, life and death as constituting the existence of Demeter and Persephone make the Persephone myth interesting for many contemporary women poets, who thus appropriate the tradition that was for a long time belonged only to men with command of classical languages. The position of the woman poet may also influence the choice of this particular myth:

[i]t has been argued that the problem confronting a woman who wants to write poetry is that tradition casts her as a Persephone in a literary underworld, an object of desire rather than an artist: ‘metaphorically kidnapped by male figures to wander around the lines of the poems that only male poets were entitled to write.’¹¹⁸

117 Mary S. Strine, “Jorie Graham’s Subversive Poetics: Appetites of Mind, Empire-building, and the Spaces of Lyric Performativity,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25.1 (2005):5, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462930500052269>> 24 April 2018.

118 Hurst 186.

The Persephone myth offers the poet an opportunity to work with various themes such as the afterlife, inevitability of loss, or construction of a separate self. The adaptation of myth is twofold: first the poets re-interpret it and then they re-create it with various degrees of change to the original narrative.¹¹⁹As they derive their work from a source narrative, their re-vision is palimpsestic – this, however, does not deny its originality. The myth of Persephone, with its abundance of possible meanings is the ideal basis for such a palimpsestic re-writing and is always offering a new re-interpretation. A cursory search through women’s poetry shows the rise of interest in the Persephone myth in the last forty years; Jenny Joseph, Carol Ann Duffy, Jo Walton, Daniella Michaelini and Shara McCallum, to name only a few, all wrote their own version of the Persephone story.

The meaning of myth is never fixed, never singular, as the works of these poets prove. It has, however, several basic characteristics re-appearing in various versions: while originally the Persephone myth, as presented by “Homeric Hymn to Demeter” was probably supposed to explain the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries, it offers several readings on the thematic level. The myth of Persephone can thus be a symbolic representation of the change of seasons: in this case, Persephone becomes the grain, buried during winter and “returning” in spring. But Persephone also presents a resurrection in a different sense, as she belongs to both the world of her mother, Demeter and to the realm of Hades. She has a familiarity with death, both as a state and as a lover, which features strongly in Louise Glück’s version. Persephone’s relationship with her mother is another point of interest and is also at the very core of this myth. Demeter features in the poems variously as an overbearing mother, a goddess, and a personification (of life, of fertility...); the Persephone myth then describes the complexities of mother love, which is particularly the case of Rita Dove’s version.

Persephone as a character is largely defined by the two main relationships in her life; she is presented both as a subject and an object, torn between Demeter and Hades, and their respective domains of influence. The poet is able to approach various stages in a woman’s life through the myth of Persephone, sometimes, like in Jorie Graham’s poetry, occurring all at once in a single consciousness. The last re-vision is that of A.E.Stallings, whose Persephone does not leave hell at all, but must accept death and Hades. Nonetheless, the poems inspired by the myth of Persephone are not restricted by the mythical story, as myth by no means yields to a single definitive meaning. Thus each of the four aforementioned poets could choose a different approach, and each of the many poets inspired by the Persephone myth presents a unique version of the story. Persephone wanders through centuries, variants and

119 Hutcheon 8.

approaches; her myth never stills. At the moment myth became entirely fixed, it would have nothing to offer – and thus Persephone must wander on, poem after poem, re-writing herself.

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