

A Close Reading of Louise Glück's "Nostos"

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In the 24-line poem "Nostos," author Louise Glück tells the story of a woman musing about an apple tree and how it has been replaced by a bonsai. Throughout the poem, Glück contrasts the motifs of permanence and impermanence using natural imagery and enjambment, suggesting that the world is only true for children, as time forces people to observe life through the lens of memories.

The title itself establishes a clash between the past and the present. Drawn from Greek literature, 'nostos' means homecoming—the return of a hero. Glück thus introduces two settings: one, the original "home," and two, a place from which the speaker must return. Additionally, the term 'nostalgia' derives from the word 'nostos,' adding a layer of time to the poem. The single-word title proposes a struggle to reach back in time to return to one's original location.

Indeed, the first sentence of the poem inserts the speaker into a moment of the past:

There was an apple tree in the yard—
this would have been
forty years ago—behind,
only meadows. (1-4)

The words "would have" mirror the melodramatic diction of an elderly individual conversing about a distant memory. Glück provides the specific amount of time that has elapsed since the speaker was at the tree to create a clear separation between where the speaker is now and where they were then. The tree's location compounds the idea distance; it is "behind" meadows, so there is a physical expanse the speaker must cross to reach the tree, but the word 'behind' is in the line with "forty years" rather than "meadows," implying that the speaker must also cross an interval of time in their mind to reach the memory of that tree. Furthermore, the em-dashes create an odd pacing. The first line could end conclusively as a sentence, yet Glück adds to it without letting there be a full beat of rest. This pacing has the effect of reflecting the natural train of

thought as someone reminisces, jumping from one thing to another. At the same time, however, the enjambment feels awkward, as Glück frequently ends lines with a stand-alone word: “only meadows. Drifts / of crocus in the damp grass” (4-5). The meaning of drift and the structure in which Glück places it feels paradoxical: things usually drift from one location to another. It is a word that evokes movement, not stillness. However, “Drifts” stands on its own for a moment at the end of line 4; this unsettling placement seems to portray the fragmentation of thought. Glück scarcely includes independent clauses. Instead, the speaker recalls the scene in bursts of sense-cued details. “Drifts of crocus” and “damp” are effective olfactory and tactile imagery that portray the speaker’s intimacy with that setting, but that’s it. They do not tell a full story. Rather, the whole poem is composed of brief moments of existence: “I stood at that window: / late April. Spring / flowers in the neighbor’s yard” (6-8). Again, Glück puts a stand-alone word at the end of a line and includes specific details like “late April” without much context to reflect how the speaker remembers parts of the apple tree but not all of it. The window further serves as a symbol emphasizing the clash between the past and present, for windows exist as barriers between two sides. Someone must be on one side of it, and there is a physical obstacle that prevents them from reaching the other side. Windows exaggerate distance. It is curious that there is a window in that memory because it contradicts Glück’s final argument that the world is most intimate in one’s childhood. Perhaps it’s pointing out that time has already passed since when the speaker first saw the apple tree—since they were outside then and could smell the damp grass—and when they stood at the window: by the time they were at the window, the speaker was both physically and temporally distanced from the original moment they saw the tree.

The poem’s sole question epitomizes this conflict of existing in the present yet viewing things from a distance. It comes near the middle of the poem, asking:

How many times, really, did the tree
 flower on my birthday,
 the exact day, not
 before, not after? Substitution (9-12)

Glück utilizes anaphora to again establish two distinct sides. There is a moment of before and after, but the speaker is looking for neither of those. Unlike with the window, there is a third element here: the “exact day.” They desire the precision of an exact moment. However, the question introduces the element of seasons, something that is in constant motion. The impermanence of nature challenges the speaker’s ability to remember the tree precisely, for that tree is never really the same. Furthermore, one does not notice when a tree is flowering. They only acknowledge it after the fact when it’s bloomed. However, one must realize that they *do* still witness in the original moment the blooming of the flower. This mirrors the argument of how children see the world as it truly is, whereas adults view life ‘after the fact.’ The next two sentences continue the contrast between permanence and impermanence:

before, not after? Substitution
 of the immutable
 for the shifting, the evolving.
 Substitution of the image
 for the relentless earth. What (12-16)

Glück juxtaposes the word “immutable” with the words “shifting” and “evolving.” Whereas the first is an attributive adjective, which usually describes unchanging characteristics of an object, the latter are participial adjectives, which inherently involve movement. The anaphoric “Substitution of” then correlates “immutable” with “image,” and “shifting” and “evolving” with “earth.” Glück orders the phrases so that “relentless earth” comes last, giving the final say to something that constantly changes. As such, it seems that the moving nature of reality takes over one’s first image of the world. *The thing is, however, the first image is invincible.* That original image forever stands, and the changing earth is only a substitution. The word substitution

connotes being a secondary figure that holds less power than the initial figure. In the context of memory, Glück argues that someone's first experience of something is always the truest one, and everything that comes after it is only a memory in the sense that it is observed in relation to the original moment.

The next sentence returns the speaker's attention to the tree with the newfound awareness that things inevitably change with time. The speaker asks in a rhetorical tone,

... What
do I know of this place,
the role of the tree for decades
taken by a bonsai, voices
rising from the tennis courts—
Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut (16-20).

Glück does not use a question mark because the speaker says "What do I know of this place" more as a statement than as a question. Additionally, they now speak in present tense. The speaker understands that they know very little of the tree, for it's been taken over by a bonsai. Here there is a confrontation between the natural world and civilization. Apple trees grow as they do. Bonsais are carefully manipulated by the human hand. Glück suggests that the original scene, the tree, is genuine and untainted like the natural world. Conversely, the present moment, symbolized by the bonsai, is tainted by human experience. The imagery fosters this point; voices replace nature's quietness—as there were no prior auditory details—and the smell of cut grass overpowers that of flowers. However, Glück implements passive voice with "taken by" to again indicate that the human changes are only a substitution and that the tree is the main subject. Glück also draws attention to the word "Fields" by using an em-dash and isolating it on line 21. It's likely that she blurts this word that reminds of the former "meadows" in between words associated with civilization (voices and tennis courts) to exaggerate how the original scene is always present when people revisit something. The speaker then seems to poke fun at themselves

for such philosophical ponderings, saying, “As one expects of a lyric poet” (22). People often associate lyric poets with feeling deeply, with attachment to nature and abhorrence of urbanization. This self-realization adds a layer of humor, making the aforementioned realizations seem like the average thoughts of any poet. However, this brisk interlude of irony is immediately overshadowed by a series of dramatic, philosophical exclamations. As such, there is an expectation that the final statements must be so substantial that even a poet critically aware of the overly-contemplative disposition of most poets feels the need to declare it loudly.

Assuredly, the conclusion of “Nostos” puts forth a chiasmic notion that remains one of the most famous of all literature. It reads, “We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory” (23-24). Contradictory to the rest of the poem, both sentences are independent clauses that stand on end-stopped lines. The enjambment of former lines had established uneven pacing where the speaker floats from one thought to another, but here, the speaker is confident, and their thoughts are complete. Glück is so sure of the universality of the statement that she begins it with we. The speaker’s experience with the tree has made them realize that the “exact” moment that’s “not before” and “not after” only ever exists once: in childhood. It is the first “look” of the world that remains in one’s mind. That image is immutable, and that image is the home of the hero’s nostos. Glück inverts the idea of memory structurally as well. When comparing the beginning to the end of the poem, the first line is about the apple tree and the last word is memory. The image of the past comes first. Furthermore, in the final two lines, there is an uneven distribution of the past, present, and future. Whereas “childhood,” or the past, stands on its own line, “The rest” incorporates both the present and future into a shared line. Glück places the most weight on childhood. Everything that comes after is a memory that inevitably exists further and further

away from the ‘original moment,’ when one still saw the world without the tarnished lens of experience.