Louise Glück's Twenty-First-Century Lyric

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IN A 2009 INTERVIEW WITH LOUISE GLÜCK, HER FELLOW POET DANA Levin observes, "I have a student right now who likes to talk about entry fees; you know, how much does it cost to enter this poem? And he recently said to me, 'The entry fee for a Louise Glück poem is, like, a dollar, but once you get in, the territory is complex'" ("For a Dollar"). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it can be difficult to recognize the complexity of a poem whose entry fee is low—whose metalinguistic and metafictional reflexivity emerges through spare, deceptively plain language and whose philosophical curiosity resides in the company of psychological insight and emotional immediacy. Contemporary poets keen to innovate in American poetics signal their ambitions, in the main, by opposing plain language, first-person speech, psychology, and emotion. At the same time, scholars working in a critical climate that favors thick description of literary works' cultural histories resolve to demystify the lyric poem as an illusion of unmediated, unsituated personal speech. Poetic practices that disrupt, interrupt, or refuse the fiction of voice and critical approaches that expose voice as a fiction can seem the only alternatives to indulging a naive belief in the author's speaking presence in the poem. Such a stark choice obscures the varied possibilities for contemporary poetic practice and makes rich and flexible theorizations of lyric the exception.[1]

The poetry and poetics of Louise Glück speak compellingly to this impasse. A prizewinning former poet laureate of the United States whose *Poems 1962–2012* has drawn praise for its "leanness of sentiment" and "precision of speech" (Chiasson 86), Glück is most frequently mentioned alongside "civic" contemporaries like Robert Pinsky and Frank Bidart (Von Hallberg 103) or in relation to the so-called confessional generation preceding hers. Her readily

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apprehended lyricism masks her powerful metalyricism. Glück's interrogation of lyric occasionally surfaces in knowing gestures, as when she comments in "Nostos" on the Wordsworthian conventions she deploys: "Fields. Smell of the tall grass, new cut. / As one expects of a lyric poet" (342).[2] More often, however, it takes shape in, rather than against, the enchantment of lyric speech: in the way a poem stops readers in their tracks with "Don't listen to me" or appeals to them to "[h]ear me out," confides that "I think I can remember / being dead" or reveals that "I speak / because I am shattered" (216, 245, 554, 271). Although Glück's best readers have been attentive to her poems' reflexive "spokenness" (Longenbach 66), it is perhaps not surprising that her experiments with poetic voice have been largely overlooked, given the recent claim that "attention to [poetry's] speech-dependence and fictionality" is "missing" in prevailing modes of poetic analysis (Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik 8).[3]

We can learn much, however, from the way these experiments expose what a recent symposium in the *Boston Review* has called "the limits of binary thinking about poetry" ("Opposing Terms"). Such thinking characterizes two critiques of lyric that would challenge the assumptions the New Criticism brought to lyric and lyric reading. In the 1970s and 1980s language poets rejected the stultifying conventions of the "scenic mode" of personal authentic experience and insight (Altieri 15), associating the scenic mode, and by extension all lyric, with an illusion of coherent selfhood. They disrupted lyric legibility to refuse that illusion and to combat what they considered the epiphanic lyric's commodification of poetry and positioning of reader as consumer. The modernist imperative that poetry be difficult was thus adapted, reinforced, and intensified in new historical and literary-historical circumstances. In these contexts, language's everyday character was devalued: for Charles Bernstein, "standard grammatical patterns" undesirably "limi[ted] . . . interpretation" (36–37); for Ron Silliman, unresistant surfaces reduced reading to a "process of consuming information" amounting to "an act of submission" (45); for Marjorie Perloff, common speech, once perceived as natural and authentic, became an unsustainable ideal in the context of late-twentieth-century talk shows, leading to a preference for "syntactic [and other forms of] indeterminacy" ("Changing Face" 95). Battle lines were drawn between the "coercive, epiphanic mode . . . with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth" and poetry of rigorous, politicized difficulty (Hejinian 41).

For these poets and critics, intelligibility had come to imply expressivity and expressivity to imply an idealized, dehistoricized self as the origin of poetic speech. Early-twenty-first-century critiques of lyric by historically minded scholars, equally intent on exposing the New Criticism's critical assumptions and procedures, have sought to demystify lyric in similar terms. An influential critique of this kind, Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), charts a literary history whereby the "ahistoricism" of the "New Critical [practice of] close reading became confused and identified with the ahistoricism of the lyric genre itself" (93). To read a poem as a lyric, Jackson argues, is to suppress its textuality and its historicity. Dickinson has seemed to exemplify the pathos of the isolated, private lyric self. Resisting the "lyric reading" by which a poem's context contracts to an "idealized scene of reading . . . identified with an idealized moment of expression," Jackson would restore Dickinson's poetry to the domestic and neighborly networks in which it circulated in her lifetime (7). If "a lyric reading practice" presumes poems "are written in view of a future horizon of interpretation," Jackson contends, "[e]verything about Dickinson's work"—particularly her habits of sending poems to correspondents

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and at times composing on scraps of household paper—"contradicts that supposition" (57). Such a conclusion rests on a binary choice: poems are addressed either to living readers or to future readers; either a poem is an instance of communication between historical persons or it claims to represent unmediated subjectivity transcending history.

The *Boston Review*'s "Opposing Terms: A Symposium on the Poetic Limits of Binary Thinking," prompted by an essay by one of modern and contemporary poetry's most influential critics, Marjorie Perloff, suggests that those who write new poetry and comment on it are prone to employ binary terms yet impatient with their constraints.[4] This essay proposes that alternatives to binary thinking might be found in contemporary poetic practice and locates one such alternative in the poetry and poetics of Louise Glück. Glück's work disentangles aesthetic and philosophical complexity from surface difficulty and dissevers poetry's intelligibility from notions of expressivity. Her poems simultaneously create the vivid illusion of voice and reveal its artifice. Reconceiving what might constitute closed and open modes and contravening presumed associations of speech with sincerity, they employ conversational tones and structures not as marks of authenticity but as aural patterns, as manifestations of language's interlocutory dimensions, and as implicit invitations to readerly response.

Two aspects of Glück's practice in particular command attention in this light. First, her poems produce a reflexive sense of happening in the present and emphasize the coming into being of a poetic speaker or lyric I through the conjunction of text and reader. This feature links Glück's poetics with the constructivism by which Perloff defined "twenty-first-century modernism": the constructivist text considers poetry "in its classical Greek meaning as *poesis* or making" and "understand[s] . . . language" not as "a vehicle or conduit for thoughts and feelings outside and prior to it" but as "itself the site of meaning making" (*Twenty-First-Century Modernism* 9). Rooting this constructivism in the poetics of T. S. Eliot ("Tradition and the Individual Talent," "The Metaphysical Poets," and his early poetry), Perloff confines her examples of recent constructivist poets to Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and others associated with the language movement. "[P]erhaps the cardinal principle," she writes, "of American Language poetics . . . has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry" ("Language" 405); Glück's poetry invites us to experience and reflect on a constructivism of voice. Second, Glück's work conveys a powerful and distinctive sense of language as situated, shared action. Relishing the textures of conversation, what Robert Frost called the "sentence-sounds" of everyday speech (675), and oriented toward an audience (often an explicit you), her poems disclose lyric's sociality. Characterized by frequent use of direct address, by simple diction and syntax, and by an emphasis on how conventional grammar enables tone and inflection to alter significance, her work suggests an understanding of poetic language as allied to everyday language's situational, context-dependent character, described by philosophers of language including J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell. Such an understanding belies the idea that lyric speech is isolated and monologic, rooting it instead in language as communal practice. The poetics to which these features give rise implicitly positions lyric to challenge dichotomies between voice and the recognition that the words from which poems are made are "*not one's own*" (Perloff, "Toward a Conceptual Lyric" 22), between a lyric I and a powerful sense of how language's communal character shatters unitary, isolated speech.

The distinctiveness of Glück's experiments with voice and the currency of their implications emerge clearly from an examina-

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tion of the rhetoric of a new hybridity of lyric and language modes, showcased in several anthologies published in the first decade of the twenty-first century—including Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr's *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002), Rankine and Lisa Sewell's *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics* (2007), Reginald Shepherd's *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries* (2008), and Cole Swensen and David St. John's *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* (2009). The entrenched assumptions that separate lyric modes (speech-based, expressive, with ties to Romanticism) from experimental modes (suspicious of voice, inheriting modernism's most challenging innovations) are manifest in the discourse that should overcome them. In articulating the new hybridity, the editors of these anthologies have largely reinforced the link among poetic intelligibility, the transparent referentiality of language, and a simplified, unified first person. Hybrid discourse would reclaim lyric by assigning to it values previously ascribed to experiment—above all, aversion to surface clarity. Entry fees remain high. In Spahr's account, the lyric element is "interiority and/or intimate speech that avoids confession, clear speech, or common sense," and experimental "[i]nnovation" entails "avoidance of linear narrative development, of meditative confessionalism, and of the singular voice" (2): both modes eschew clarity or plainness. "Today's hybrid poem," Swensen writes, might combine "a stable first person" with disrupted temporal sequence or scrambled syntax or join "illogicality or fragmentation" with "the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle" (xxi), while Sewell's new poets "deliberately and self-consciously engag[e] with the lyric tradition but also question . . . that tradition through techniques of disruption, diversion, and resistance" (3). Silent about modes of questioning not conveyed by difficulty and disruption, editors of hybrid poetry trace predictable literary histories.[5] Although St. John speaks of rejecting the labels "avant-garde, postmodern, New Formalist, . . . mainstream" (xxvii), his coeditor, Swensen, writes of the legacy of a "split" between two models: on the one hand, "the poem as a vehicle for conveying thoughts, images, and ideas initiated elsewhere" and "language as an accurate roadmap or system of referring to situations and things in the real world" and, on the other hand, "the poem as an event on the page" and "language . . . as a site of meaning in its own right" (xviii). Such a division relies on a polarity that misreads twentieth-century poems: to suggest that Frost (Swensen's example) regards language primarily as "an accurate roadmap" or "vehicle" is to ignore the "performative" dimension of his work (Poirier xii) and to elide the puns, riddling parables, and allusive, musical, and ritualistic effects that make "Spring Pools" exemplify for Jonathan Culler a lyric ill served by New Critical strategies of reading ("Why Lyric?" 203–04). Such accounts of hybridity confound modernism's legacy and circumscribe lyric's complexity.

Dismissed by detractors as "mainstream" (Perloff, "Language Poetry" 419) or late Romantic (Sadoff 99), Glück is not normally considered in the context of the new hybridity. However, her essays comment with wit and bite on the terrain mapped by her "experimental" peers, sharing their aversion to the complacency of the scenic style. In the forewords she wrote as judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets from 2003 to 2010, Glück articulates tensions and paradoxes that resonate with but also correct those of the language-lyric hybridity that emerged concurrently. Ken Chen's *Juvenilia*, for example, is "exhilaratingly modern (anti-catharsis, anti-epiphany) while at the same time never losing [its] attachment to voice" (Foreword [*Juvenilia*] xvii); Jessica Fisher's *Frail-Craft* shows a "marked taste for experiment" and "intelligent suspicion of worn forms," but its "persistent

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strangeness" is "not a matter of the shrewdly confused surface or of opacity" (Foreword [*Frail-Craft*] xvi): her work "elude[s]" an easy grasp yet remains "plain-spoken" (xvi, xi). Glück's polemically titled essay "Against Sincerity" (1993) contrasts honesty and sincerity with "experiment[ation]" (*Proofs* 45): honesty and sincerity "refer back to the already known" (33), while experiments, "not wed to any one outcome," entail "discover[y]" (45). Glück rejects a poetics whose practitioners "claustrophobically oversee or bully or dictate response" (45); like more familiar critiques of the sincere lyric, such as Hejinian's description of "coercive" poems of sincerity, the "'closed text' . . . in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading" (42), Glück's critique resists "the restrictive governing of meaning by will and logic" (Foreword [*Cuckoo*] ix) and the "inertia of emphatic closure" in poems "weighted at the end with insight" (Foreword [*Frail-Craft*] xv). At the same time, however, her essays challenge poetry's dominant markers of philosophical ambition and champion work that innovates outside recognized experimental forms. Wryly observing that contemporary poetry whose "style" "is too lively, too grammatically clear, . . . not, on the surface, difficult"—however "learned and sophisticated," however "philosophic[ally] . . . radical" it may be—"does not conform to the established definitions of intellectual daring," she implies that established daring may not be daring at all ("Ersatz Thought").

Consider, in these contexts, the experiment Glück undertakes in *The Wild Iris* (1992). Glück's voice constructivism is nowhere so vivid as in this volume, which is characterized by three kinds of speakers: flowers and plants; a gardener, many of whose poems are "matins" and "vespers" addressed to a god; and a speaker, perhaps divine, whose poems are given titles evoking time, seasons, and weather ("Clear Morning," "End of Winter"). The poems whose speakers are flowers or plants conspicuously stage their own coming into being. These speakers ask both to be heard and to be seen through. "At the end of my suffering," "The Wild Iris" begins, "there was a door."

> Hear me out: that which you call death
> I remember.
> . . . . . .
> It is terrible to survive
> as consciousness
> buried in the dark earth.
>
> Then it was over: that which you fear, being
> a soul and unable
> to speak, ending abruptly. . . .

The poem sketches the barest spring scene for this emergence: "branches of the pine shifting," "the stiff earth / bending a little," "weak sun," "birds." Its closing lines fuse the story told with the act of telling:

> You who do not remember
> passage from the other world
> I tell you I could speak again: whatever
> returns from oblivion returns
> to find a voice:
>
> from the center of my life came
> a great fountain, deep blue
> shadows on azure seawater. (245)

Textual voice is this poem's subject: "Hear me out," "I tell you," "I could speak." These lines do not so much tell a story of the wild iris's waking from dormancy as enact the coming into being of fictive speech, and secondarily of a poetic speaker, in the reading. Reflecting on the emergence of an I, the poem treats poetic voice as a matter less of origin than of effect: an evanescent, contingent effect produced by text and reader. Inviting readers to experience this effect and to be conscious of the means of experiencing it, "The Wild Iris" marries "lyric enchantment" with "experimental interrogation," in the words of the poet Reginald Shepherd (xi).[6] Without the forms of disjunction and difficulty that,

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at least since the 1970s, have become the most readily recognizable means of investigating voice in poetry, Glück discloses the process by which textual voice is constructed.

Despite the closing image's allusion to Wordsworth's spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings that originates from emotion recollected in tranquillity, lyric voice in "The Wild Iris" does not originate in an uncomplicated remembering: the claim "I remember" is belied by the voice's arising from "oblivion." As T. S. Eliot described such a process, in the writing of a poem "something germinating" is "transformed into" and "replaced by" the poem's words, words unanticipated, for the poet "does not know what he has to say until he has said it" (*On Poetry* 106–07). Eliot's account suggests a model of poetic creativity that involves an openness to processes (psychic, linguistic, historical) outside the poet's control; the same is true of Glück's poem and of her related prose. For Eliot the process of composition is heuristic and transformational; once the words have been found, the "thing" or "creative germ" "has disappeared, replaced by a poem" (106); Glück calls poetic composition "discovery" and the poet a "scientist . . . not wed to any one outcome" (*Proofs* 35, 45): "The only illuminations are like Psyche's, who did not know what she'd find" (45). The resulting verse (signaled in "The Wild Iris" by the doubled word *returns*) does not so much point to or express a thing in the world or in the self as bring something new into being: a "new compound" (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 41) or "a new element" "detached" from its maker (Glück, *Proofs* 91, 16), to be "hand[ed] over" in a "final separation . . . from the author . . . to an unknown audience" (Eliot, *On Poetry* 109). Poems, Glück writes, are "like experiments, which the reader is freely invited to recreate in his own mind" (*Proofs* 45): in the experience of reading, the creative experiment "returns," but in new contexts, with unforeseen results. Constructivist in the sense Perloff (who draws on Eliot) describes (*Twenty-First-Century Modernism* 9), this poetics further considers the poem as event and reading as performance: literary invention, Derek Attridge elaborates, entails an opening to "the unknown," the unanticipated, the hitherto excluded or occluded, and this opening "is experienced . . . *as an event* . . . by the reader (who is, in the first instance, the writer reading or articulating the words as they emerge)." The work of art enables a like event to "*happen* . . . *to* the reader" (59), who, by "performing" and "being performed by" the work, "experience[s]" the "singularity, alterity, and inventiveness of the work . . . in the present" (136).

"The Red Poppy" draws readers' attention to this kind of event, simultaneously engaging and dismantling expectations we bring to lyric speech:

> The great thing
> is not having
> a mind. Feelings:
> oh, I have those; they
> govern me. I have
> a lord in heaven
> called the sun, and open
> for him, showing him
> the fire of my own heart. . . .

The poppy asks, "What could such glory be / if not a heart?," then addresses readers:

> Oh my brothers and sisters,
> were you like me once, long ago,
> before you were human? Did you
> permit yourselves
> to open once, who would never
> open again? Because in truth
> I am speaking now
> the way you do. I speak
> because I am shattered. (271)

The guileless poppy showing her heart suggests a Romantic and post-Romantic lyric speaker overflowing with emotion. But by asking, "What could such glory be / if not a heart?" the poem throws into doubt the idea that poetic display expresses psychological

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depths. To speak because "shattered" might be to utter a cry of emotional devastation. But it might equally be to recognize that to speak is to be "open" to and broken open by language that constitutes, as much as expresses, subjectivity, language received, learned, fundamentally shared; under these conditions, "I" can speak only by breaking the boundaries of an I conceived as self-enclosed. This text insists on its ability to speak. But it acknowledges that it speaks only insofar as "you" encounter and experience a line like "I am speaking now" in what William Waters has called the "*now* of reading" (149). Read as well as red, the poppy comes to life in such a performance.

"The Red Poppy" enacts a literary performativity, in which the reader, "performing the work, [is] taken through its performance of . . . linguistic power" (Attridge 98). But it also exemplifies how, in Glück's poems, the event that happens in the instance of reading frequently represents what ordinary-language philosophy calls illocutionary utterance: that is, the speech acts in her poems are oriented toward interaction with an audience rather than toward information given, narrative recounted, or truth asserted.[7] The poetics that corresponds with a focus on audience interaction helps us to see past lyric's supposed isolation to its potential for what Siobhan Phillips usefully names "situated exchange" (346). Characterized by illocutionary structures—questions, demands, replies to implied elements in a conversation, second-person address—Glück's poetics reflects an orientation toward language that shares affinities with Wittgenstein's dictum that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (43). Her poems of address and conversation make clear that such use occurs between language users, that, in Cavell's terms, the "primary fact of natural language is that it is something spoken, spoken together" (*Must* 33), not so much a system of reference as an interactive web.[8] Reliant less on distinctive individual words than on "the possibilities of context" (Glück, *Proofs* 4), her poems implicitly follow Austin's principle of asking "*what we should* [i.e., would or do] *say when*" (181).

An attunement to what we say when demands what Cavell names the faculty of ear. When he encountered Austin, Cavell had recently given up a career in music; as Cavell's autobiography recounts, that Austin's philosophical "practice had to do, in its own way, with the possession of an ear, was surely part of its attraction and authority" (*Little* 323–24). Like Cavell, and like Frost, who expressed the idea that "[t]he ear is the only true writer and the only true reader" (677), Glück possesses and values an ear for the textures of everyday language, preferring, by her own account, the "rules" of syntax to the "romance" of "music" (*Proofs* 8), relishing "timing, . . . the way ideas are held in suspension" and the subtle implications of "tone" (81, 39). From *Vita Nova*'s rueful analysis ("Interesting how we fall in love: / in my case, absolutely. Absolutely, and, alas, often—" [369]) to *The Seven Ages*'s relentless intimations of mortality ("You will want the earth, then more of the earth—," "it will feed you, it will ravish you, / it will not keep you alive" [421]), from the comic petulance of a gardener bargaining, in her "vespers," for better growing conditions ("other regions get / twelve weeks of summer" [279]) to an earthworm's precisely articulated didacticism, reminiscent of Marianne Moore, in *A Village Life* ("it is the nature of the mind / to defend its eminence, as it is the nature of those / who walk on the surface to fear the depths—" [607]), her work's tonal variations depend on unfolding syntactic patterns, "subtleties of . . . pacing" (*Proofs* 4), nuances of inflection.

The distance between what Glück calls ear and the ideal of "sincerity or naturalness," the "anecdotal" quality, of the scenic mode (Altieri 15) becomes clear when she praises Fisher's work for its "extraordinary sensitivity to English syntax," its "perfection of ear" (Foreword [*Frail-Craft*] xvi). Fisher's visually

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striking, playfully disorienting, intellectual and intertextual poems show, Glück observes, a "marked taste for experiment" and refuse "meaning like a kite with its neat string of explication attached"; they nonetheless savor the rhythms of meaning making. The same is true of Glück's work. Ear for her is a matter primarily of grammatical rhythm, of what Frost called "the abstract sound of sense," best attained "from voices behind a door that cuts off the words" (664). These patterns appealed to Frost as patterns. He invites a correspondent to ask himself "how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied":

> You mean to tell me you can't read?
> I said no such thing.
> Well read then.
> You're not my teacher. (665)

Glück's poems at times produce patterns as unmistakable as Frost's sentence sounds, as in these dialogues between divorcing spouses in *Meadowlands* (1996):

> Why is it always family with you?
> Can't we ever be two adults? (323)

> You know why you cook? Because
> you like control. A person who cooks
> is a person who likes
> to create debt. (348)

> I stopped liking artichokes when I
> stopped eating
> butter. Fennel
> I never liked. (310)

Intonation here not merely expresses oppositional postures but also constitutes them. Frost called the sound of sense "the abstract vitality of our speech," "pure sound—pure form" (665). Although not traditionally musical if we conceive music as aligned exclusively with poetry's nonsemantic features (as in a line of modern poetics descended from Mallarmé), sentence sounds nonetheless seek a performative reading and thus suggest lyric's sound-based rootedness in performance, as well as, more broadly, the experiential, sensory character of literary language. Ear, then, works with this poetics' lyric and literary performativity.

Although Frost's and Glück's sentences may convey emotional or psychological attitudes, what is at stake is not their expressivity, from the inside out, but their recognizability, from the outside in. The question of ear thus opens onto ways of thinking about the relation of language to subjectivity that bypass the binary choice between colluding with "the cult of personality, of a subject somehow *outside* language" (Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder* 8) and concluding that "[l]anguage produces us, not the other way around" (Blasing 5). An ear for "*what we should say when*" accepts language as essentially shared and fundamentally enacted, located in concrete instances of exchange. In Cavell's terms, "Talking together is acting together, not . . . transferring unspeakable messages or essences from the inside of one closed chamber to the inside of another" (*Must* 33); language is less externalized or internalized than it is part of the social fabric, a way of "acting together." Breaking down an easy distinction between inside and outside, David Schalkwyk points out that to recognize what we would say in a given situation, we must be able to hear with the mind's ear; a poetics of ear presumes that, as he writes in discussing the relation of Shakespeare's sonnets to his drama, the "'inner ear' can hear tone, volume, timbre, pitch, even accent. These . . . are traces of exteriority that are borne in the very silent listening of the deepest inwardness" (106). Pondering the everyday phenomenon of "inner speech," silent but "heard by its possessor," Denise Riley finds that "as soon as I try to overhear myself, I can detect my usual accents and the timbre of my voice" ("Voice" 58–59): thus, we cannot consider silent speech and articulate speech "opposites, able to be tidily partitioned by strict interiority versus exteriority" (61). In J. S. Mill's model of poetry

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as something overheard, the self's speaking to itself in moments of solitude, unconscious of a listener, inner speech is explicitly monadic and monologic; for Riley, by contrast, speaking to oneself, "inner speech[,] is evidence of the sociability of the language" ("Voice" 81). Understanding such sociability "matter-of-factly" rather than as alienating "lack" or loss (88), Riley (who draws on thinkers as diverse as William James, Merleau-Ponty, and Voloshinov) rejects the "usual antithesis (crudely, in 'continental' versus analytic philosophy) between language as speaking us, and our status as freely choosing users of language," an antithesis that inflects the language-lyric divide (*Impersonal Passion* 3).

With their investment in dialogue, their unmistakable sentence sounds, and their combination of vivid spokenness and reflexive textuality, Glück's poems give experiential, affective texture to such analyses. The poems of *Ararat* (1990), a seemingly confessional sequence diagnosing family dysfunction, repeatedly draw attention to speech acts: "I'll tell you something," the volume's central speaker says; "I'll tell you what I meant. . . . Believe me" (204, 203, 231). In a striking instance, "The Untrustworthy Speaker" begins, "Don't listen to me." It continues, "When I speak passionately, / . . . I'm least to be trusted"; "[w]hen I'm quiet, . . . the truth emerges" (216). In a version of the Cretan-liar paradox, this speaker is impossible to resist: to turn away is to follow her directive, but to listen is to fall under the spell of her speech. The poem engages us primarily through the act of speaking, the communicative game it plays, the eventness whereby the reader is called on to become aware of listening or not listening. These features are more significant than the speaker's story; unlike the typical speaker of dramatic monologue (Browning's Duke) or the unreliable narrator of fiction (Nabokov's Humbert Humbert), Glück's speaker preempts the call to fill in the gaps she tries to hide, telling us what she cannot see, what her story will not contain.[9] "The Untrustworthy Speaker" frames lyric as a seductive, vulnerable, canny performance of voice, neither a "decontextualized expression of subjectivity" nor a "dramatic monologue with a speaker whose situation, attitude, and goals we should novelistically reconstruct," the two dominant models to which Culler's reconsideration of lyric seeks alternatives ("Lyric" 885). Although "The Untrustworthy Speaker" means its reader to be aware of these paradigms, it opens up a performative, illocutionary axis for lyric outside them.

Ararat's most arresting metalyric alters the pattern of address to a generalized reader or listener. Like that of "The Untrustworthy Speaker," the title of "Child Crying Out" draws attention to a kind of speech, but the speech act it names is not the one the poem performs. "Child Crying Out" is spoken by a mother to her young son. "You're asleep now," it begins; "your eyelids quiver." He has "pushed the covers away," but though his body is exposed, she reflects on what she cannot see:

> As for your thoughts, your dreams—
>
> I'll never understand
> the claim of a mother
> on a child's soul.

"[I]n love," she recalls, she "made that mistake,"

> taking
> some wild sound to be
> the soul exposing itself—
>
> But not with you,
> even when I held you constantly.
> You were born, you were far away.
>
> Whatever those cries meant,
> they came and went
> whether I held you or not,
> whether I was there or not.
>
> The soul is silent.
> If it speaks at all
> it speaks in dreams. (232)

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Rightly observing that "[c]ontemplating a mother's relationship to a child causes Glück to question the fundamental nature of lyric itself," DeSales Harrison takes this poem to make the "momentous claim" that the soul is silent, its "way of speaking . . . severed from waking language" (195). This claim, however, is the speaker's, not the poem's. Convinced that her son's cries neither expose his soul nor solicit her attention, the mother concludes that "[t]he soul is silent" or "speaks only in dreams." Her conclusion takes the child's cries as continuous with and representative of language. Yet the poem's way of using language belies the choice between the cries expressing the soul and the soul's silence: although the cries are unintelligible, the poem is not. Relying on everyday diction and syntax, the poem demonstrates a trust in ordinary words, not to express a soul but to recognize one: a social, implicitly dialogic act.

Addressing the child as "you," the poem rests on a faith that language can foster the child's emerging subjectivity: he is a you before he is an I. The psychoanalytic valences of this process have implications for paradigms of lyric. Better described by object-relations-influenced models than by the Lacanian paradigms dominant in literary studies, those psychoanalytic dimensions speak to the essentially social nature of subjectivity.[10] Glück's "You were born, you were far away" conveys with breathtaking simplicity the finality and wonder of birth and of the child's separate subjectivity. "As for your thoughts, your dreams—" approaches cliché; this blankness renders the mother's experience of coming up against the child's unknowability, his essential privacy or solitude, which the cries do nothing to diminish. This privacy is that of a "you": it is a privacy that is understood socially. Its implications differ from those of Mill's paradigm of an isolation uncontaminated by others' eyes and ears, which is still presumed to be lyric's norm by critiques of lyric reading. The mother accepts that she does not know the child's thoughts or dreams, but she continues to speak to him. Addressing the child in the present about his past as an infant, the poem enfolds his changing relation to language and anticipates being read by him in the future. Language does not "expos[e]" the soul, but it forges relation in ways characterized both by "mistake[s]" and by "love."

"Child Crying Out," then, contradicts its title and rejects conceptions of lyric poets as infantile, in the manner of Barbara Johnson's provocative paradigm; it speaks from a position other than the child's.[11] Although it has one speaker, the poem is not monologic; it investigates language's mediation and, more important, its construction of relation. This lyric undoes its own closure: a full account of how it explores language and subjectivity contradicts the certainty of the final lines. This speaker—unlike that of "The Untrustworthy Speaker" or "The Wild Iris"—addresses an interlocutor who is ostensibly not the reader, a sleeping child, and although the addressee is unresponsive, his silence is only contingent (he may wake; he may grow up) and not inherent (like a nightingale or a skylark, or an addressee who is dead); "Child Crying Out" is thus not an apostrophe but one of those poems "that say *you* to a human being," simultaneously addressing contemporary and future readers, and that Waters has theorized as a significant category of lyric (1, 25). The contradiction between the cries and the poem's intelligible speech suggests an orientation toward a you who hears the poem, an openness to reading and to the future.

A similar structure of address obtains in "Sunset," a metalyric in *The Wild Iris* that imagines a god's reply to human prayers. The speaker's "great happiness," the poem asserts, is "the sound your voice makes / calling to me even in despair"; his "sorrow," "that I cannot answer you / in speech you accept as mine." The emphasis then shifts from my "speech" to "your . . . language":

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> You have no faith in your own language.
> So you invest
> authority in signs
> you cannot read with any accuracy.

This point of potential "despair" gives way to affirmation: "your voice," the speaker confirms, "reaches me always."

> And I answer constantly,
> my anger passing
> as winter passes. My tenderness
> should be apparent to you
> in the breeze of the summer evening
> and in the words that become
> your own response. (298)

Like "Child Crying Out," "Sunset" contrasts two models of language. In one, "signs" must be authorized by a god function; in the other, language as found, received, and used suffices: "Sunset" stages a competition between "distrust of language" and "trust of ordinary human speech" (Cavell, *This New yet Unapproachable America* 32). The mother in "Child Crying Out" must confront the recalcitrance of the child's cries and accept that they, and potentially the language they prefigure, are inexpressive; "Sunset" raises the possibility of language as noncommunicative, failing to reach another. Yet the statement "I cannot answer you / in speech you accept as mine" contradicts itself, establishing the communication it calls impossible.

"Sunset" further posits language as untethered from any verifiable origin. Glück does not let us forget that a poet constructs this speech: the god may not exist; the addressee—that is, the poet—has only her "own language," her "own response," through which she fabricates what may be merely the illusions of illocution, reciprocity, and meaning. Yet those valences of doubt and instability are only part of the story. Against a philosophy of language based on "signs," "Sunset" offers a model of language as relational: human "calling" establishes a connection that the poem's "tenderness" reciprocates. Like "Child Crying Out," "Sunset" uses ordinary language, relying on simple syntax and a limited vocabulary—nearly a quarter of the poem's words, for instance, are pronouns. That these common words acquire meaning and emotional resonance in this way affirms a Cavellian "trust in ordinary human speech": "You have no faith in your own language," but "Sunset" enacts this faith, by constructing a context that makes the accusation emotionally credible.

The final word, "response," "invest[s]" not in language as "signs" but in language as a participatory web, a set of shared practices that is, in Wai Chee Dimock's words, "contingent at its core," reflecting "our customs, our communities, our shared agreements about how things are" (67). The failures of communication the poem transposes to a vertical, human-divine axis attest to the fragility and contingency of everyday communication and thus of the world we build through the language we share. In Cavell's terms, "Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon" an ability to "project" words into new contexts, where they establish "shar[ed] routes of interest and feeling, . . . senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment." To understand that "[n]othing insures" the prevalence of this ability is to confront a "vision . . . as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying" (*Must* 52).[12] This simple, difficult poem, resting on a circulation of shared words, captures something of this precarious communion.

From another perspective, "the words that become / your own response" refers to the poem itself. The brief pause created by the line break after "become" results in a performative moment in which the poem's words become the reader's. Insofar as the ending sends the reader back to the words just read, it intensifies the poem's status as happening. Insofar as readers hear the last lines' invitation to "respon[d]" and feel addressed, called on to continue the dialogue—their "response"

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invited but not determined—the ending projects that performative moment into an unpredictable, undetermined future.[13]

Glück's constructivist poetics of voice and her illocutionary poetics of plain surfaces, ear, and dialogue enable us to trace lines of correspondence and influence between oppositional camps in and across generations; the examples I offer in closing sketch, rather than exhaust, such potential lineages and affinities. Attuned to the foregrounding of language as context-dependent and conversational (a practice we can trace back to Frost and Moore, among others),[14] we find this feature not only in the work of a contemporary like Frank Bidart, whose prose syntax can seem disconcertingly ordinary, but also in that of John Ashbery. Ashbery's poems are conversational in texture despite their logical disjunctions and shifts of register; overtly concerned with representation (maps, instruction manuals, paintings, film), his work is no less concerned with communication. Many of his poems play, lightly but not quite ironically, on the impersonal intimacy of poetic address and on the performance of reading: "I hope you're not listening (but you are, / somewhere)" (52). More generally, with their frequent questions and interruptions and their slippages between distinct, but equally recognizable, conventions of conversational, literary, journalistic, and other discourses, they extend an ongoing invitation to share the pleasurably unpredictable process of meaning making, even if meanings are no sooner made than dissolved.

Glück's constructivist, intimately engaging speakers bring into relief an inventive investigation of textual voice—as distinct from ambitions (for example) to emulate visual abstraction, to include history, or to claim new subject matter—as one of modern American poetry's lineages. This lineage cuts across avant-garde-mainstream and modernist-confessional divides. We might consider that *The Wild Iris*'s flower poems lyricize these lines from the opening of *The Waste Land*: "Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow . . ." (lines 5–6).[15] In separating Eliot's investment in poetic voice's constructed and constructivist character from his works' most overt discontinuities, Glück does not bypass Eliot's experimentalism: she adapts it, innovating within her literary-historical context, where difficult surfaces, inherited partly from Eliot, are the norm. In her work, an Eliotic poetics of heuristic composition and of voice untethered from a stable origin results not in polyglot intertextual fragments but in speakers whose vivid presence exists in tension with the self-undoing analyses the poems perform. Such a conjunction makes perceptible a connection between Eliot's emergent textual-voice effects and effects such as those of Sylvia Plath's "Elm," in which a tree confides, "I am inhabited by a cry" (193), or of the same poet's self-staging, self-destructing "Lady Lazarus." Although many of Plath's critics have been blind to that poem's reflexivity, its eponymous speaker's "theatrical / / Comeback in broad day" is a trick hiding in plain sight: Plath conjures a first-person speaker into being ("These are my hands / My knees"), then the poem's "big strip tease" deconstructs this speaker until nothing is left but "air" (247).[16] "The Untrustworthy Speaker" and "Sunset," whose god exists only in the words of his addressee's response, illuminate, too, the unsettling qualities of a less discussed poem like Robert Lowell's "Records." Enclosed entirely in quotation marks, "Records" takes the form of a personal letter, whose authorship is thus called into question. Implicitly addressed to Lowell by his wife, the letter reflects on its writer's coming upon some "records . . . of your voice," beginning to listen to them, and immediately ceasing to listen. "Records" reads as a painfully intimate revelation, a love letter from wife to divorcing husband reflecting on recordings that affect her like "the voice of the beloved who had died" (681); it reads equally, however, as a

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found poem in which the author's voice plays no expressive or subjective role but instead is an absent, mechanically recorded, and unheard object. Observing such effects expands our sense of the possibilities for poetry that would scrutinize voice without dismissing it.

When Glück's red poppy contends that "I am speaking now / the way you do" and her white rose asserts that "I am not like you, I have only / my body for a voice" (271, 289), these poetic voices speak out of and correct a moment when lyricism is frequently understood to preclude a sense of language as a communally binding act and to disallow reflexive awareness of the fictive voice's dependence on a textual body. In the poetics these instances exemplify, words, grounded in possible situations and conversations, aim less at a (prior) target reference than at a (future) answering utterance, and lyric, spoken only insofar as it is heard—that is, read—reflects human, social contingency and a literary potential to address conditions and contexts beyond its own. In the encounter Glück's texts invite, the strangeness of lyric voice emerges through the workings of ordinary language; the constructivist performance is at stake, not the coherence of the writer's (or the reader's) self; and, in the eventfulness of now, the future is anticipated but not foreclosed.

Notes

For their thoughts on this essay, I am grateful to Charles Altieri, Stephen Burt, Ron Bush, Jeri Johnson, and Siobhan Phillips.

1. Welcome exceptions include recent work on lyric as recurring performance (Miller, *Reading*; Culler, "Lyric"), on lyric's origins in performance (Brewster), and on lyric's addressivity (Waters) and sociality (Izenberg).

2. All citations of Glück's poems refer to *Poems 1962–2012*.

3. For suggestive attention to voice in Glück, see Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic* and "Louise Glück's 'I'"; Harrison; Hedley; Longenbach; Spiegelman; Townsend; and Warren.

4. The essay in question was "Poetry on the Brink." Calling attention to a "citational" mode in 2010 (*Unoriginal Genius*) and "a conceptual turn" in 2012 ("Poetry" and "Toward a Conceptual Lyric"), Perloff has continued to set "voice" against linguistic sensitivity, metalinguistic sophistication, and poetic inventiveness.

5. Sharing Keller's resistance to the "problematically tidy model" of thesis (lyric), antithesis (language), and synthesis (7), I wish further to challenge the nature of the divide.

6. Shepherd's terms suggest the continued salience of Charles Altieri's analysis of how poetry seeks to negotiate the competing demands of "lyricism"—with its desire to imagine ideal attributes of self and world (and their complementarity)—and "lucidity," which is aligned with Enlightenment reason's demystifying but illuminating power (Altieri 13).

7. J. L. Austin defines the "illocutionary" character of a speech act as its ability to perform the function of "asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention, pronouncing a sentence, making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism"; illocution is "performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (99–101). Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* challenged philosophy's tendency to approach language primarily in its constative function of statement or description. Austin's strict sense of the performative (the classic example is the marriage ceremony's "I do") should be distinguished from the literary performativity of Attridge's model. Culler describes literary "performativity" as "less a singular act accomplished once and for all" than a potential for "repetition" (resembling Judith Butler's development of the concept) through literal performances (of music or drama) or in "acts of reading or recollection" (*Literary* 163).

8. Perloff's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* aligns Wittgenstein's philosophy with the language writing of Silliman, Hejinian, and others. Glück's plain style suggests a Wittgensteinian exploration of "how 'humanity' in fact *does* use language, given," Perloff maintains, quoting Ian Hacking, "that the language we use is 'first of all public and firmly rooted in what we do together'" (182).

9. The title announces a dramatic monologue, but, as Keniston points out, the poem is a lyric—not, however, because the speaker is difficult to distinguish from the poet ("Fluidity" 310). Although I come to different conclusions, I share Keniston's interest in "Glück's intelligent preoccupation with questions central to the tradition and continued viability of the lyric" (*Overheard Voices* 75).

10. For these models, see, e.g., Winnicott; Mitchell; and Benjamin.

11. Citing Lacan on language development and Culler on apostrophe, Johnson argues that "lyric poetry itself—summed up in the figure of apostrophe—comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, 'Mama!'" (38).

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12. The implications of Cavell's work for recent poetry that Gardner describes differ from those I pursue here.

13. Although it is not my primary consideration in drawing attention to this poem, the temporal recursiveness that this moment prompts us to consider—each time readers encounter the poem, they find their response anticipated and invited—forms a suggestive link with recent accounts of the way literature, lyric in particular, might become differently meaningful in multiple contexts. These accounts suggest that the future the poem projects, although unforeseeable in its historical particulars, need not for that reason be understood as ahistorical. Armstrong writes of the "open-endedness [that] is essential to the ability of [literary] works to survive and be transmitted to and read by audiences that do not yet exist" (213). Attridge calls this open-endedness the work's "alterity" and "inventiveness," which recur differently in the performances that different readings constitute (157). Miller contends that Dickinson "conceive[d] of a poem as . . . much like a script that gives rise to numerous performances" ("Dickinson's Structured Rhythms" 403), not transcendent but "meaningful beyond a single context" (*Reading* 12).

14. On the "illocutionary, directly interactional and vernacular elements" of Moore's verse, see Miller, *Marianne Moore* (62).

15. Glück's 2006 volume *Averno*, which retells the story of Demeter and Persephone, returns to the trope of speech from a place of "oblivion" that is both deathlike and fertile, enabling the birth of something new (487–95). The volume's bleak, charred landscapes and engagement with fertility myths recall *The Waste Land*, while the first-person speech, which is sometimes aligned with Persephone, suggests a conception of the lyric I as intermittent, discontinuous, recurrent.

16. Forbes gives an account of the poem's reception (112–14).

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