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**From the Selected Works of Michael Theune**

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**<em>How Many More of Them Are You?</em>  
by Lisa Lubasch**

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*Vita Nova* by Louise Glück. Ecco, \$22.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

The art of poetry is the art of losing constantly remastered. At least this is true of the poetic lineage which finds its mythic origin in Orpheus and is embodied historically in Dante—who remembers the beloved through epic reconfiguration—and Rilke—whose “lament-heaven” is absence’s dark, refined apotheosis. In her eighth book of poems, *Vita Nova*, Louise Glück manages her late participation in this lineage by investigating and critiquing the conditions and motives which make possible—and problematic—the lineage’s central poetic task.

Inscribed under Dante’s sign and referring often to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, a key referent for Rilke’s elegiac projects, *Vita Nova* admits its lateness but assumes this lateness as its vantage point. From her perspective as a late twentieth-century writer, Glück observes not only loss, but also ambitious attempts to match or overcome that loss through song, attempts to which Glück initially responds with ironic critique. In the operatic “Orfeo” she writes, “I have lost my Eurydice, / I have lost my lover, / and suddenly I am speaking French / and it seems to me I have never been in better voice . . .” Although irony has long been a powerful feature of Glück’s aesthetic, in *Vita Nova* irony seems absolutely appropriate; it is a step in an investigation which yields diverse, and therefore seemingly honest, results. In “Orfeo” the opening ironic gesture becomes a defense of the artist: “Tell [the furies] there is no music like this / without real grief.” And in “Relic” irony trembles into accusatory paradox; Eurydice states:

Where would I be without my sorrow,  
sorrow of my beloved’s making,

without some sign of him, this song  
of all gifts the most lasting?

How would you like to die  
while Orpheus was singing?  
A long death ...

I think sometimes  
our consolations are the costliest thing.

Not only an encounter with other poetry, *Vita Nova* represents Glück's highly self-conscious engagement with her own work and life, her own composition of song and loss. Insofar as *Vita Nova* is confessional, it confesses mainly the ruthlessness of Glück's art. Many of the poems read like ambitious *ars poeticae*. In "Roman Study," Glück signals a move away from the somewhat forced revisions of *The Odyssey* in her previous volume, *Meadowlands*, and announces a self-consciously new and determined approach to her art in an equation of her poetic situation with Aeneas's mythic situation, in which, though "little was left to do / ... after the Greeks," what still remained was "a new species of thought entirely, / more worldly, more ambitious / and politic ... And the longer he thought / the more plain to him how much / still remained to be experienced, / and written down ..." In "Nest," after watching the careful, difficult work of a bird trying to collect and assemble the material for a nest, Glück considers her own constructions:

And as I peered out my mind grew sharper.  
And I remember accurately  
the sequence of my responses,  
my eyes fixing on each thing  
from the shelter of the hidden self:

first, *I love it.*  
Then, *I can use it.*

The autobiographical details used in *Vita Nova* are somewhat different from those used in earlier poems; motherhood and the wife's compromises are replaced by illness and accident. Although the details perform much as they do in earlier poems, referring to dogged faithlessness and flirtations with hope in ways that are typically abstract and spare, in *Vita Nova* the details are also always specifically emblematic of loss. As the burning house in Buddhism

is a central symbol of the constant change of all things and as Elizabeth Bishop lost three houses, Glück's actual loss of a house to fire in April 1980 is featured in the Dantean "Inferno":

In my dream, I built a funeral pyre.  
For myself, you understand...

The world changed. I walked out of the fire  
into a different world—maybe  
the world of the dead, for all I know.

In a reversal of mythic entitlement and autobiographical detail, "Formaggio," a poem named for a local produce market, includes an account of a fall from a previous, gloriously unified world into the capitalist, modern world:

The world  
was whole because  
it shattered. When it shattered,  
then we knew what it was.

It never healed itself.  
But in the deep fissures, smaller worlds appeared ...

... they became  
a block of stores; they became  
Fishmonger, Formaggio.

In an essay from *Proofs & Theories*, "The Dreamer and the Watcher," Glück differentiates between what she considers two forms of consciousness: the dreamer who, due to passion or inattention, does not perceive the changes and differences of the world; and the watcher who wills herself to see the world for what it is—intensely unfamiliar and coolly divisive—and who sings to keep herself awake. In *Vita Nova*, Glück is both dreamer and watcher. Though numerous poems give precedence to watching—they read like a watcher's detached account of her own dreams or of her dreamlike, previous lives—stylistic and structural features join the two states of consciousness. Repetition, double- and triple-checkings in single lyrics—"Timor Mortis" three times asks, "Do you remember your childhood?"—seem both inquisitive and obsessive. The non-chronological, allusive sequence of the book as a whole allows poems to communicate with each other both as call and response and

as scintillating resonance. The events of “Inferno,” for example, respond directly to the earlier “Condo,” which states, “The dream confused them ... / repeated // scenes of the gutted house,” while the inquiring voice of “Timor Mortis” sounds mechanically and hauntingly throughout the book, making the book seem like a single, simultaneously mythic and analytic frieze.

If there is fault in *Vita Nova* it is lack of fault; its frieze has little relief. Although *Vita Nova* discusses and often ruthlessly enacts the inevitable, at times its gestures can seem programmatic. The multiple references to dreams can feel like props. Repeated insights can feel like intellectual commentary. But the risk *Vita Nova* takes by arguing in a highly theoretical space also gives rise to its virtue: it does not escape but suffers through paradox and diminishment the repetitions of tradition. Glück has created a strong testament to the cold tempering required to turn resign into re-sing.