

Narrative Continuity and Natural Collective: Minimalism in *Winter Recipes from the Collective*

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Abstract—Existing reviews mainly regard pessimism as the accordatura of *Winter Recipes from the Collective* due to its leaping narrative and metaphorical imagery. This essay aims to reexamine it from the perspective of minimalism, arguing that what is hidden behind the seemingly pessimistic confession is the continuity of narrative and the emphasis on the collective as a polysemant, referring to society, nature, and the universe. The study finds that formal minimalism is demonstrated in the uncertain narrator, unbinding narrative time, and the form of book-length sequence, forming the continuity of the narrative. The minimalist images of moss, Bonsai, and Zhu Da's painting further realize the thematic minimalism. Confronted with the physical and spiritual plight in the post-pandemic era, the poem indicates the indispensability of the collective, as the society to the individual, nature to a pine, and the universe to the particular, serving as the essence of winter recipes.

Keywords—Louise Glück, minimalism, *Winter Recipes from the Collective*, collective

I. INTRODUCTION

As Louise Glück's (1943–) first post-Nobel collection, *Winter Recipes from the Collective: Poems* (2021) is highly acclaimed as great poetry that always is [1], bringing readers an intimate experience of traveling and talking with themselves with a sense of grim joy. Existing studies, however, are mainly composed of sporadic book reviews, lacking deep and systematic research relatively. Haunted by the sense of austerity, critics mainly focus on themes of death, darkness, and loneliness in the collection. Logan's comment is a representative one, arguing that it is a brilliant and scary book of spiritual transformation and depression as the loss of passport in *The Denial of Death* becomes the *noche oscura del alma* by St. John of the Cross [2]. This kind of pessimistic review, however, cannot explain the “enviable emptiness” the narrator confesses to capturing at the end of the poem and can easily make one mistake Glück for a pessimist [3]. The natural reference to the classic of Taoism, *Daodejing*, also embraces the poet's philosophical connotation which deserves further explanation. As the poet herself replied in one interview, those views overlook the possibility that emerges from the fact and the stubborn human need to hope [4].

Despite the pessimism among comments, the lucidity of the poetry is highly acknowledged among scholars. Su comments that the poems display placidity and minimalism, echoing the tone set by the cover: a chick quietly accepts one's own ability in life [5]. This minimalism, actually, can be traced back to Glück's early poems both thematically and formally. Like her predecessors, Emily Dickinson and George Oppen, Glück pursues a kind of minimalist ecstatic in her poems whose *idée fixe* is essential qualities like

permanence [6]. As an admirer of the latter, she also writes in her illuminating collection, *Proofs and Theories*, that Oppen's art is severer, serene, fiercely economical and makes this “collective inheritance” of minimalism into her own [7]. Taking *Vita Nova* as an example, the minimalist economy in both the diction and the length achieves the narrator's synchronous presence and absence, laconism and eloquence, astringency and energy [8]. For *Winter Recipes from the Collective* (hereinafter “*Winter Recipes*”), this new volume both descends from the early minimalist style but more significantly demonstrates a kind of transcendence philosophically with “the great number of references to Chinese culture” [9].

There is, nevertheless, no further discussion on the poet's intention of integrating eastern culture into her poetry among existing studies. Intriguingly, the cover of her earlier 13th collection, *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, is also closely related to China—a photograph of the Nanpu Bridge in Shanghai, indicating the poet's attention to the eastern, especially Chinese philosophy and culture. In this sense, why the poet chose a Chinese artist, Zhu Da's painting as the cover of the new collection? In what way do the poems connect with the sentiment reflected in the cover? Enlightened by this potential connection, this paper studies the minimalism in the collection, particularly the title poem, attempting to find out “the state” that Glück thought her book inhabited beneath the veil of hardness and darkness in life [3].

II. FORMAL MINIMALISM IN

A. Literary Minimalism

Minimalism, a movement that originates in the mid-20th century in sculpture and painting, is characterized by an attempt to reduce the art form to its most basic elements [10]. Concerning the research subject and purpose, this paper mainly concentrates on literary minimalism, especially in poetry. Revisiting the term from a broad historical context, minimalism stems from abstract expressionism but also develops into a counteraction to its predecessor [11]. This anti-formalist poetics is more congruent with contemporary literature that forms literary minimalism which can be further traced back to the imagist poets of the early twentieth century, among which Williams Carlos Williams undoubtedly is one of the spokesmen [12]. His famous imagist encapsulation, “No ideas but in things”, comes from the 1927 version of *Paterson*, appealing poetry to focus on objects rather than concepts, actual things that trigger images in the mind instead of the abstract characteristics. This treatment of “things” as verbal images of irreducible particularity can also be perceived in Glück's poetry, such as the chosen poems and

The Wild Iris in her 1992 collection. Hence, within the poetics of minimalism, the following first analyzes the minimalist style of the title poem and then deciphers its underlying themes from the prominent imagery that reflects the significance of the collective, including moss, bonsai, and Zhu Da's painting on the cover.

B. Uncertain Narrator and Unbinding Narrative Time

As the title poem of the whole collection, the minimalist style of *Winter Recipes* is not realized through the brevity in the form as that in *Autumn* or *Song* but through the uncertainty in the cryptic narrative, inviting readers to participate, decode and construct the gap of meaning. Beginning with documentary storytelling about the old men's gathering moss in another century, the time setting of the narrative voice is implicated in the modern when "such as you and I can hardly imagine" [13]. While the narrator "I" can be the poet, the recipient "you" is more multivocal, the readers plurally or her sister personally. The switch of tense by using "can" instead of "could" also subtly removes the main narrative from the reminiscence to the comment on the contemporary. By blurring the boundary between the ancient past and the demotic present, the narrative time is unbound, flowing freely to the psychologic moments and constituting the ahistorical continuity of consciousness.

As in the second stanza, there is an abrupt leaping in narrative time by memorizing the pruning of the specimen. The narrator "I" in old age retrospectively returns to the young age with a porcelain bowl in her hands. From then on, the narrator switches between these two stages of life, weaving philosophical comments with momentary memories, realizing a sense of nonlinear continuity in the narrative based on psychological feelings rather than chronologic order. The sadness of witnessing a tree's death in childhood is still perceivable when confronted with the approaching death in old age. The repeat of the past makes it both personal and universal without separation of time, and space as well as the distance between readers and the narrator. The fleeting time is visualized, tangible and touchable, through sunrises and sunsets during the life of a tree or a man in the passing "shadows" over the snow. With the plainest description, the following line further epitomizes the vicissitudes that both a man and a tree have gone through as "steps approaching and going away".

Stepping into the last stanza, the narrative time is specified in December when "the trees had been hung with tiny lights". Being a Jewish poet and a secular author, this special time, being described as the month of darkness, possibly and potentially reveals a reversion to the Christian standards for representation of dates and times in a kind of "Jewish way of thinking" [14]. In the Jewish calendar, the darkest month refers to Kislev when the Jewish Festival of Lights is celebrated, which is also known as Hanukkah or Chanukah and "usually falls to November and/or December of the Gregorian calendar" [15]. Seemingly, the glowing trees are implying Christmas. Rather than the big Christmas trees, however, the tiny lights on the minimal bonsai trees are more likely to imply the menorah that is kindled on Hanukkah. As a cultural emblem, it represents brightness that is rooted in Mattathias's rebellion against Syria King Antiochus's tyranny in Hebrew history as well as the later Hanukkah

"Miracle". This combining of both Jewish time and Christian time achieves the same effect, generating broader time and space for the individual utterance. This kind of revision of scriptural canons is also practiced in Glück's other book-length sequences like *Ararat* and *The Wild Iris*. Considering her beloved sister Tereze Glück's death (1945–2018) in December, the poem expresses more than the personal pain in reality since the lights come just after the darkness in Kislev. The reunion on Christmas among those who lost their loved ones factually implicates the strong belief to continue life as a collective and it is for this reason that the poet states as testimony that "we were encouraged never to be alone".

C. Narrative Continuity: The Book-length sequence

Besides the continuity in the narrative time, minimalism is also knitted into the form of the book-length sequence with the thread of the minimalist details that reflect the nature of things, thus finishing the poet's game of jigsaw [4]. The casual appearance of "wind" in the title poem is the first invisible string that braids the various poems in the collection, achieving the internal resonance of the whole book. In the first stanza of *Poem*, wind serves as the main power that resonates in the speaker's ears when climbing the ice-covered mountain with her companion. As the narrator sings like a mother to her companion, the latter possibly implicates the speaker's sister who is also a fictional writer. Metaphorically, battling with the sickness is exactly like painstakingly climbing over an ice-covered mountain, which is saturated with the fear of the uncertainty of the approaching death or the end of the road. Though keeping falling downward and downward physically, the narrator appeals to the power of wind, or more precisely, poem, to strengthen themselves spiritually.

Similarly, the dead leaves also need wind to lift them from the stone to return to nature as a collective because a pine in high wind is just "like man in universe". In this sense, the wind embodies both the power of nature and the love from the collective as the narrative voice claims that "I touch your cheek to protect you—". In the subsequent poem, the wind blows again and the shadows of pines recur, recreating a similar scene that not only visualizes the imagination towards death and darkness but more significantly presents the speaker's spiritual autobiography which is both continuous and essentially hopeful. Therefore, in *Winter Journey*, there is the bright moon in the night and the presence of a friend serves as a torch though "the dark obscured her." Different from the dead leaves indoors without wind, in the ninth poem, *Second Wind*, "the leaves fell off the tree". The witty and punny conversation between the two sisters centers on the energy and power embodied by the wind, enjoying the joy of living and the accompany of each other that transcend time.

Based on the above, without complicated expressions or obscure allusions, the collection is threaded by the exquisite arrangement of the terminal but dynamic and metabolic events like winter, journey, wind, and tree, all of which have been endowed with the poet's subtle feelings and circle around the existential issues. Besides the bonsai mentioned in the title poem, the driftwood and the mishappen trees in *The Setting Sun* discuss the relationship between the artist's articulation and physical disability. The concrete details

relate to each of them and then connect together to create a poetry panorama in the book-length sequence. Though the uncertain narrator forms the mystic and minimalist narrative, the flickering clues appeal to the readers' positive participation by providing multiple interpretations instead of certain answers as Glück firmly believes that "some of you will know what I mean".

III. A NATURAL COLLECTIVE: MINIMALISM IN THE THEME

A. Moss

In addition to minimalism in the form that is demonstrated through the continuity in narrative time, the use of minimalist imagery also deeply interprets the theme of the whole collection as well as the poet's deep concern and philosophical thinking toward the survival predicaments of human beings in the contemporary world. Moss is the first important image that appears in the four-part parable. It appears in different forms, whether as the core material for winter sandwiches or the indispensable decoration in Bonsai. Etymologically, the word "moss" refers to both swamps and swamp vegetation, which is a kind of "small, cryptogamous, herbaceous plants growing together" [16]. Botanically, as the first group of higher plants landing on the earth, bryophytes have existed on earth for at least 500 million years with the simplest life wisdom. It witnesses the prosperity of gymnosperms and angiosperms quietly and silently but is also easily obliterated. The latter derivative further describes the existence of moss as being "small" and "growing together", which is exactly a botanical metaphor for the living state of the old men in modern society, a group of the vulnerable and the forgotten.

Through an omniscient and empathetic narrative voice, the oblivion of the old is unmasked in *Winter Recipes* by pointing out that "they had been born in another century". These old men, however, embody the wisdom of living in hard times by making moss sandwiches, implicating that they deserve respect and care from the collective. Therefore, after the death of the old men, their solitary wives are integrated into the group whether as nurse helpers or sandwich sellers. Contrary to poetic fantasy, the reality is that the old is suffering on the edge of contemporary society, especially during the pandemic. With the government's policy of herd immunity, more than three fourth in the pyramid of the death toll is seniors more than 65 years old [17]. By combining the poetic imagination with the contemporary world, the mortality number unrevealed is magnified through the literary presentation of moss, which the old men depend on to survive in the hard times of winter.

B. Bonsai

Bonsai is another minimalist image that contains profound subjects concerning the relationship between man and nature. The second stanza begins with a retrospect of the speaker's childhood experience of watching Bosai, which is pruned only into those shapes that are "natural to the species—". A small room is even designated especially for those little trees that have been removed from nature. Despite the meticulous care, the narrator subsequently mourns that some of them die and transcendently reviews that "all things die eventually". This short but deep meditation towards the inevitability of

mortality reflects a sense of detachment that is simultaneously transcended by the revelation of man's spiritual inseparability with nature besides physical dependence. At the beginning of the third stanza, the narrator admits the complexity and difficulty of nurturing Bonsai. The following lines are more important, confessing that the process is:

not simply caring for the little trees
but caring for ourselves as well,
feeding ourselves, cleaning the public rooms—

Considering the pandemic, the delicate protection and pruning of the little trees connote the narrator's inner desire to return to nature, trying to create a spiritual Arcadia to perceive the rhythm of life and inspect the true self. Whether a tree or a man, there is no miniature in death. The tree removed from nature is no different from the man separated from nature.

Judging from the stones, transplanted moss, and the delicate pruning of the plant, however, the poet mistakes Bonsai or Pun-sai developed in Japan for the art of Punjing originated in ancient China. In *The Setting Sun*, the narrator thinks that the latter is just a piece of driftwood that like "mishappen trees the Chinese grow". This misunderstanding is also made in some insightful studies by critics, particularly on the minimalism in Glück's earlier works. Yenser argues that Glück's seventh volume, *Vita Nova*, is committed to a sense of austerity and minimalism due to the extravagant economy in the poetry [7]. This minimalist poetics is later compared with the emptiness in prized Japanese ink paintings, especially Zen gardens, which, however, ignores its more profound root and tradition of Chinese ink painting.

In fact, both Bonsai and Penjing stem from China which can be traced back to the late neolithic age according to the archaeological discovery of two pieces of pottery that were engraved with the design of *rohdea japonica* in the Hemudu Site [18]. Since its spreading into Japan from the Heian age, Bonsai has developed differently from Penjing in China. The former focuses on the elegance and quaintness in the form of the plant itself while the latter reflects the epitomized beauty of nature through the micromesh layout of mountains, water, plants, and other natural elements. Aesthetically, it is Penjing that can serve as a miniature of nature instead of Bonsai because the former is regarded as "the silent poetry and the three-dimensional picture" [18].

Compared with the moss that draped around the plants' roots, moss in Penjing grows naturally on the soil and the stones as an indispensable part of the small ecological system rather than a decoration. Thus, though being removed from nature into the container, the tree is still separated from its collective, namely nature. As for people living in the era of the epidemic, a house is also a container that cuts out the relationship between human beings and nature. For the poet, taking care of a little tree not only helps the integration of the narrator into the collective of nature but allows her to experience the joy and sadness in the metabolic process of life in advance from the youth, growth, and death of a tree.

C. Zhu Da's Painting

Before starting to read this new volume, its cover

undoubtedly catches the first sight of both readers and critics. The cover, full of emptiness and simplicity, is composed of a painting by Bada Shanren with inscriptions on the top of the right, voicelessly and vigorously delivering the poet's philosophical thinking towards the collective in the most minimalist expression. Su argues that it is one of the group paintings known as the "Album of Pheasants" which is disagreed by the present study [5]. Conducting a deep investigation, it was found that the chosen painting on the cover belongs to the album created by Bada Shanren in 1695 when he was 68 years old, which is currently collected in Shanhai Museum [19]. In contrast, the "Album of Pheasants" is a group of paintings that center on different kinds of birds, which is not found in the Freer Gallery or the Metropolitan Museum. What Su implicates is possibly another famous painting created by Bada Shanren during the mature period of his art as is shown in Fig. 1 [20]. Therefore, it's inaccurate to declare that the painting of the chick on the cover belongs to the "Album of Pheasants" since the pheasant and the chick are totally different.



Fig. 1. The solitary bird.

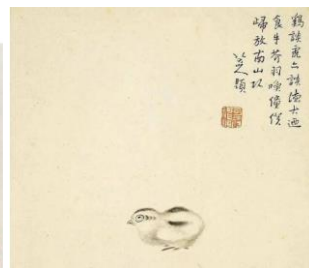


Fig. 2. The chick.

As can be seen from the painting in Fig. 2 [20], there is nothing more than a little chick on the rice paper except for a poem and a seal at the top right corner. The body of the animal is portrayed in one time smoothly with light shadows on its belly and dark ink on its two tiny wings. Its hidden claw suggests the birth of a new life in the world in a state of self-protection, which is all alone by itself. What is eccentric and enigmatic is the rolling eyes of the little chick, wide-open and dismissive with indifference and unbridled innocence.

The inscriptions, a five-character quatrain filled with allusions, also indispensably constitute the whole painting. The first two lines satire the idle talk prevailing in the Wei and Jin dynasties by alluding to the talk of chicken and tiger. In the Jin dynasty, a man bought a long-singing chicken and kept it close to his window, which finally could speak human language and talk about metaphysics with him all day [21]. As for the talk of the tiger, people who talk about metaphysical theories, especially those scholars and literati at that time were called "tigers" by Zen. What is conveyed behind the lines is that the experience and epiphany of life should not and could not be replaced by the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, in the last two lines, Bada Shanren hopes his chick to be free in the mountain instead of being fettered by secular desire as those ones in the cockfighting whose tails were poured with mustard as a kind of stimulation for chasing and fighting with other roosters.

Combined with the structure of the painting, by leaving the little chick in a blank world, the animal is transformed into an embodiment of eternal existence in the universe that transcends both time and space. The silhouette is the simplest

with no detailed portrayal of its body or relevance of its environment. Thus, the object itself is foregrounded and visualized, requiring the viewer to experience and feel with the heart instead of the eyes. This substitution of visual authenticity for the authenticity of the heart is also Glück's expectation of her readers to read between the lines patiently.

Connecting the two artists, whether Bada Shanren as a painter in ancient China or Glück as a poet in contemporary America, there is spiritual resonance between their inner states through an artistic and ideal reflection in their works. The meaning of life, for both the two, is to transcend fame and fortune and finally achieve a living state of true freedom and spiritual independence. The small seal with four characters, "Ke De Shen Xian", which namely means "thus becoming an immortal", further expresses this kind of minimalist philosophy not only in physical need but more significantly in spiritual ease through the principle of "non-action" and "naturalness" advocated by Taoism.

For Glück, that philosophical thinking is also echoed by choosing the painting as the cover, a poetic response to the shortage of food physically and the panic about the unknown virus spiritually in the pandemic. The "invigorating winter sandwich" made of moss is undoubtedly not "a fine meal", but can save people's lives in the hard winter. "The Chinese were right, she said, to revere the old". This a calm comment and similar irony on the government's irresponsible attitude towards the old during the pandemic. The references to Daodejing that everything is "change", "connected" and eventually "returns", exactly deliver a sense of detachment to life through the metaphor of water with the most inclusiveness and interconnectedness.

In this way, *Winter Recipes* echoes the minimalist cover by pointing out that men are infinitely small compared with the unknown universe and are no different from a little chick in the empty world or "a pine blowing in the high wind". The existence of man is essentially a short and lonely experience with oneself. Though the world is always changing, by replacing the uncertainties of the unknown with certainties of gathering power from the collective, whether a chick, a pine tree, or an individual can realize his value of existence and become a self-sufficient living universe.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, instead of being a pessimist, what Glück conveys through the minimalist style both formally and thematically in *Winter Recipes* is a sense of hopeful continuity and profound thinking of the importance of the collective in the modern world. The minimalism in form imbues the poem with an open and dynamic space of interpretation through the uncertain narrator, the leaping narrative time, and the unique form of the book-length sequence. The seemingly fragmented narrative leaves unnoticeable details that connect with other poems in the collection, requiring readers' immersed participation in the poet's inner world as well as inviting the construction of their own different poetry worlds.

Thematically, moss, bonsai, and Bada Shanren's painting on the cover are essentially minimalist with the rich connotation of Taoism in the face of the dilemma mankind confronts in the contemporary world. Moss as a botanical metaphor unmasks the status quo of the old in the pandemic

American society while bonsai exposes the rapture between man and nature. More profoundly, the choice of Bada Shanren's painting as the book cover indicates man's positioning in the universe. For mankind, society is the first important collective to protect its members, especially the weak and the minor while what is more significant for the individual or the man is the self-positioning in the universe to form a collective relationship with nature. Only by realizing this recipe can we go through the unknown winters in the future and keep the fire alive.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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