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Rachel Cardall
Brigham Young University

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Trenton Hickman, Chair
Mary Eyring
Kimberly Johnson

Department of English

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

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Rachel Cardall
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

The primary speaker of Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* is a wanderer in her own garden. She relentlessly searches for God among her foxgloves and daisies, straining to hear God's voice. Two other speakers, God and the collective plants of the garden, offer their perspectives without acknowledgement by the human speaker. Many critics read these two other speakers as, in fact, narcissistic projections of the human speaker, a God and a world made in her own image. In this thesis, I clarify that the kind of narcissistic projection that occurs in *The Wild Iris* is actually productive for genuine spiritual experience and encounters with the divine, not self-deluded illusions. If these two other speakers are in fact animated by the human speaker, it is through poetry's ability to facilitate encounters with alterity. With Michel de Certeau's concept of *metaphorai* in mind, I argue that the speaker's eventual communion with God is particularly made possible by her use of metaphor, which allows her to linguistically traverse the distance between her and God.

Keywords: Louise Glück, poetry, metaphor, prayer, God, divine hiddenness, silence, distance

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Introduction

There won't be any new words from Louise Glück, a previous US Poet Laureate and a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who passed away at 80 after more than half a century writing poems. Though her entire body of work has received critical acclaim, arguably her most formidable collection is her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Wild Iris,* whose delicate title belies wrestles with God and stark meditations on solitude. On its face, *The Wild Iris* has split custody, its words distributed among three speakers: a human, God, and the collective plants of the garden. But many critics read *The Wild Iris* as an exercise in narcissistic projection, where there is in fact only one speaker. Linda Gregerson sums up this projection: "God and the flowers speak with the voice of the human; the human writer has no other voice to give them" (134). Largely these critics attribute the narcissism not to self-importance but to "the intensity of its speakers' longing for presence," particularly God's presence (Keniston 76). I read *The Wild Iris* as an articulation of a kind of poetic spiritual projection that does not end in solipsism nor eclipse God's identity, but that participates in God's revelation of himself.

For Abrahamic religions, the place where humans and God were once in closest proximity was a garden. For a collection nostalgic for communication with God, it is fitting that *The Wild Iris* situates itself in a post-Edenic garden. Throughout the collection there is a sense of disorientation and alienation from divinity, and human presences are sparse—no one else enters the speaker's sphere except occasionally a partner and son. The collection's God says to the human speaker, "you are suffering / because you were born, / because you required life / separate from me" (287). The human speaker registers this separation between herself and God and uses language to attempt to traverse this gap. Glück's discernment of this alienation is reminiscent of Allen Grossman's notion that "the 'occasion generative of speech' is some dislocation or 'dis-

ease' of the relationship of a subject and an object (for example, as between lover and beloved or a god and his world). Creation is not the speaking itself but the primordial disease or fall which thrusts me into a predicament in which speech is the only way" (218). The collection suggests that the distance between God and his creation cannot be collapsed through language but can be navigated by language.

The Wild Iris is split among three speakers: the flowers, the human, and God. Frank Bidart calls the collection "a vast hierarchic celestial conversation in which those who talk only dimly apprehend one other" (19). The one most frustrated by this barely intelligible conversation is the human speaker, who pleads with God to make himself known. Even though the Abrahamic God is generally considered omniscient, the speaker (as well as the religious in general) prays verbally, as if formulating desires into a communicable language makes those desires more real. Communicating verbally is also an invitation for a verbal response, which the speaker desires, perhaps for the unmistakability of a verbal response. God has made attempts to communicate with the human speaker, albeit in a different form than the speaker's prayers:

> I've submitted to your preferences, observing patiently
> the things you love, speaking
> through vehicles only, in details of earth, as you prefer,
> tendrils
> of blue clematis, light
> of early evening. (251)

God speaks through the plants and light, but the human narrator has trouble picking up these attempts. God speaks, indicating that the silence the human narrator experiences isn't God's, since in fact God, like the human narrator, doesn't withhold speech. Rather, the silence constitutes the nature of the relationship, not because God is unresponsive, but because there is a distance between the narrator and God that renders God indiscernible to the human speaker.

The poems where the human speaker speaks to God are titled “Matins” and “Vespers,” which are prayers in Christian liturgy spoken in the early morning and late evening, respectively. In multiple matins poems, the speaker laments the absence of God in her life. She refers to God as an “unreachable Father” and “agent of my solitude” (247, 268). She points out, “I cannot love / what I can’t conceive, and you disclose / virtually nothing” (255). The enjambment of “you disclose / virtually nothing” is mimetic of the speaker’s hope that God will disclose himself—we are suspended in the space after “disclose” only to have the negative outcome confirmed. The human speaker’s inability to perceive God is curious considering that traditionally matins involve reciting verses from Psalm 117, which includes “God is the Lord and has revealed himself unto us.” Thus, Glück names her poems after prayers that say God has revealed himself, but the contents of her poems express frustration at God for not revealing himself, or not revealing himself well enough to be obvious to her.

Naming poems after liturgical prayers suggests that these poems function as a kind of ars poetica. Matins and vespers are forms—they have a recognizable and repeatable structure—and reference to these forms make it apparent that poetry, even of the free verse variety found in *The Wild Iris*, is subject to constraint. Suggesting that these poems are a type of these prayers calls attention to the nature of poetry as a distilled and rarefied kind of speaking, pure from arbitrary or spontaneous utterance. The words of matins and vespers are constrained according to the words of scripture, tradition, time of day and year—forces that are outside the control of the singular speaker. In the case of Glück’s matins and vespers, this comparison invites us to read them not as mere complaints or pleas whose words are secondary to the speaker’s communication of frustration or desperation, but as crafted pieces whose exact words and

arrangement differ from ordinary speech in that they "[foreground] the rules of the linguistic and formal codes" (Blasing 5).

It is fitting that matins and vespers are said at specific times of day, as *The Wild Iris* is time-conscious, not only of the time of day but also of months and seasons. The cycles of day and night, summer and winter, are superimposed on each other in the collection: the matins poems (or morning poems), along with poems titled "End of Winter," "April," and "Spring Snow," are only found in the first half of the collection, while the Vespers poems (or evening poems), along with "Midsummer," "End of Summer," "Early Darkness," "Harvest," "Sunset," "Lullaby," and "September Twilight" are only found in the second half. Morning and spring are associated with birth and beginnings, while evening and autumn are associated with death and endings. These poems are ordered chronologically, which means that they aren't presented haphazardly, but according to patterns of day and night, summer and winter. Lived time is chaotic, and making linguistic, ritualistic sense of it is a way of creating order out of that chaos. Analogous to the way the collection is structured, the disoriented human speaker orients herself in time by prayer. William Davis writes,

> It is interesting that both matins, the first of the canonical hours, and vespers, the penultimate hour in the Divine Office, are prayers prayed in twilight hours. These two sequences, then, suggest beginnings and ends, ends and beginnings, placed in the contexts of times in which the natural illumination, the literal light, is diminished, blurred, or blotted out. (48)

Light—which we will see later in the collection as a figure for God—is diminished at the time of all the speaker's prayers, and this contributes to the feeling of divine absence in the collection. Naming these poems after these kinds of prayers seems appropriate for the themes of the collection, as they resemble human utterance against a backdrop of silence, a silence pregnant with the possibility of God. There is a ritual nature to these prayers, as opposed to other kinds of

prayers that are spontaneously uttered, and the occurrence and recurrence of matins and vespers suggest that communion with God is always deferred. The unfinished nature of these prayers reflects God's unreachability. Ira Sadoff interprets Glück's recurring attempts at connection in a negative light: "Deprived of scope and a sense of relation, her speakers seem doomed to serial repetitions of failed attempts at intimacy" (83). While it may be true that serial repetitions do perhaps indicate repeated failure in one sense, I find it more accurate to say that they indicate a relentless will to come closer to God (which eventually pays off in the end). The continued speech reflects the continued estrangement between the speaker and God. It is an ongoing acknowledgement of and an attempt to repair their dis-location, and to cease speaking would be to cease their relationship, however estranged.

Spatial Estrangement

In one of the matins poems, the speaker perceives a distance from God: "Unreachable father, when we were first / exiled from heaven, you made / a replica, a place in one sense / different from heaven, being / designed to teach a lesson" (Glück 247). In these lines, the alienation from God is rendered in spatial terms: humans reside in a separate location after being exiled, dis-placed. The collection's setting in a garden suggests a nostalgia for the garden of Eden, a place where God and man could interact. There is no mention of transgression or sin in the collection, yet the speaker experiences the aftermath of a "fall." The collection's version of the Genesis story places the weight of fault for the fall not on humans for transgressing or sinning, but on God for putting humans at a distance. This distance between an Edenic heaven where God resides and the replica of Eden (the speaker's garden) is the cause of God's unreachability, not a moral incompatibility. Given the Biblical allusions of the collection, there is

an unfulfilled promise of God's proximity looming in the background of the poems. (One of the names for the messiah is Immanuel, which roughly translates from Hebrew to English as "God is with us.") The primary issue the speaker has with God is his perceived location, far away and unknown.

To reinforce God's distance, several poems describe the voice of God as an echo. As a sound that bounces off other objects in a space before reaching the listener, echoes are a reflection of the sound rather than the original sound. This makes an echo less attached to its speaker than a regular sound is, and echoes make the source of that voice murkier. The fact that God's voice is an echo makes the distance between speaker and listener more apparent, implying that God's voice had to travel through obstacles to reach the listener. Echoes also disorient the listener as they warp where the listener is in relation to the speaker, and they render the spatiality of an environment more apparent. In "End of Winter," God says,

> Never imagining the sound of my voice
> as anything but part of you—
> you won't hear it in the other world, not clearly again,
> not in birdcall or human cry,
> not the clear sound, only
> persistent echoing
> in all sounds that means goodbye, goodbye—
> the one continuous line that binds us to each other. (254)

The "other world" in these lines seems to be the speaker's garden, the replica of Eden where God is not present. God initially informs her, "you won't hear [the sound of my voice] in the other world," but revises his statement in the next line by saying "not clearly again," indicating that the human has heard God's voice before, and will hear it again, albeit muddled, as it is with an echo. In "Scilla," the flowers taunt the human speaker: "Why do you look up? To hear / an echo like the voice / of god?" (257). Looking up would only incrementally increase the speaker's ability to

hear God's voice—if that voice comes from the heavens—but she positions herself as best she can to hear, even just its echo.

In one of the few poems where the speaker witnesses God, the speaker does more than look up—the biblical allusions suggest that it took spatial movement to encounter him. Glück uses the story of Moses to emphasize the wandering that precedes communion with God. In the fifth vespers poem, she writes, "Even as you appeared to Moses, because / I need you, you appear to me, not / often, however" (285). On two separate occasions in Exodus, God invites Moses to come up to Mount Sinai. In the poem, the speaker completes a similar journey: "I climbed / the small hill above the wild blueberries" (285). The image of the blueberries reinforces the biblical allusion: blueberries grow on a bush, and God first appeared to Moses in a burning bush. In God's second appearance in Exodus, he appeared as a fire whose smoke enveloped all of Mount Sinai. In the poem, God appears in the same way he did to Moses on the second occasion: "you came down to me: / at my feet, not the wax / leaves of the wild blueberry but your fiery self, a whole / pasture of fire" (285). The images of the blueberry bush and the pasture of fire blend the two instances of God's appearance in Exodus, but the poem favors the drama of the second appearance by having the speaker climb *above* the wild blueberries, and having God's fiery self not be confined to the contours of the blueberry bush as it would be if the poem were merely resembling his first appearance in Exodus. Rather, the entire scene is set on fire, making God's presence overwhelmingly obvious. Both the biblical account and the poem involve God coming down from heaven to meet the speaker, suggesting that encountering God is not an act of sheer willpower on the part of the speaker, but requires some reality outside of her control. Nevertheless, the speaker needed to move spatially to perceive God.

"Vespers" and "Presque Isle" likewise suggest that a change in location is needed to perceive God. The human speaker looks beyond the scope of her immediate surroundings and wonders if simply being elsewhere would allow her to behold even more of God:

> Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree.
> Here, in Vermont, country
> of no summer. It was a test: if the tree lived,
> it would mean you existed.
>
> By this logic, you do not exist. Or you exist
> exclusively in warmer climates,
> in fervent Sicily and Mexico and California,
> where are grown the unimaginable
> apricot and fragile peach. Perhaps
> they see your face in Sicily; here we barely see
> the hem of your garment. (278)

Her tongue-in-cheek conclusion that God just so happens to exist for those in another part of the world acknowledges the ridiculousness of her fig tree test but nevertheless indicates a preoccupation with where God is. God exists, but exists elsewhere. The enjambment "here we barely see /the hem of your garment" emphasizes God's obscurity from her vantage point: we are initially presented with "here we barely see" but then read it again as "here we barely see the hem of your garment." Not only does the speaker barely see God, but barely sees even the very periphery of his figure. This makes the contrast with the preceding line "Perhaps / they see your face in Sicily" all the more apparent, as coming face-to-face with someone holds the possibility of mutual perception. In the context of other biblical allusions throughout the collection, the images of the apricot and peach are reminiscent of Eve's apple, embodying what is desirable yet unattainable for the speaker. The repeating vowel sounds in "unimaginable," "apricot," and "fragile" work to sonically create a sense of accumulation, rendering the unattainable God and fruits as weighty absences.

The yearning for closeness is temporarily satiated in “Presque Isle.” This poem stands out from the rest of the collection, as it is the only poem whose setting is far outside the Vermont garden. Though this poem initially feels out of place, it can be read as a companion piece to the first “Vespers” as well as a fulfillment of the desires to be close to God expressed elsewhere in the collection. The title is ambiguous: though there are several cities named “Presque Isle,” the poem gives no indication of its exact whereabouts. A presque-isle is a peninsula with such a narrow connecting stretch of land that it almost resembles an island, and the absence of specific identifying features suggest that this poem is not meant to refer to a specific “Presque Isle.” The poem’s setting is a room with a “small balcony overlooking the ocean,” which could be found in any of the locations listed in “Vespers”: Sicily, Mexico, California (291). This suggests that the setting of this poem is in one of these places the speaker previously yearned for. In the poem, the “dish of apricots” on the table is also far from a random choice: the speaker previously desired an “unimaginable apricot,” and now these apricots exist almost casually. Rather than being one of the central objects of desire, the apricot is close at hand, only needing bare illustrative descriptors and simply existing in proximity to the speaker. Likewise, if God were close to the speaker, the speaker would not need to voice her yearnings so effusively, but could treat his presence as a given, like she does with the apricots.

“Presque Isle” has a different emotional register than many of the other poems, as it is primarily descriptive of sensory phenomena and setting, but not descriptive of a state of mind. Most of the other poems describe a sense of frustration, yearning, despondency, or triumph, but in this poem, we sense only an implication of contentment, as the speaker is physically in a place where she earlier supposed others could see God’s face. Perhaps her opaqueness expresses a bland emotional state, which in her case, is a relief. The speaker of “Presque Isle” rests from her

usual emotional turmoil in wondering how to communicate with God and can treat the proximity of God as casually as she treats the dish of apricots. This presque isle is as opposite her Vermont garden as it can be. Instead of laboring in her garden to yield food, food in this presque isle has already been planted, grown, picked, and even placed in a dish. In this way "Presque Isle" is illustrative of the speaker's nostalgia for a garden of Eden, of a setting where she would neither have to labor for food nor labor to communicate with God.

"Presque Isle" is one of the few poems where the human speaker interacts with a lover, and his presence introduces another layer to her nostalgia for closeness with God. Glück wrote *The Wild Iris* near the end of her marriage, and "Presque Isle's" recollection of a halcyon time in a relationship blurs the object of the speaker's desire between God and a lover, rendering God as a lover and a lover as God. The speaker speaks of beholding and stroking her lover's face—"my finger pressing your lips"—which is ordinary enough for a romantic relationship but is monumental in context with "Vespers" where she yearns to even *see* God's face. Now she can not only see "God's" face but can touch it. She takes in the sight of him, noticing small details that could only be seen up close: "Around your face, rushes of damp hair, streaked with auburn. / Muslin, flicker of silver" (291). The scene reveals the nature of her yearnings to be close to God; she is not content with an amorphous, abstract God, and instead wants a physical, sensual God, one that she can be near enough to touch his lips. This hint at an erotic relationship is not an anomaly in the collection: the speaker elsewhere refers to God as "dear trembling partner" and "love of my life" (273). Glück emphasizes the speaker's project of closing distance between herself and God by putting their dynamics in erotic language. As sexual contact dramatically closes distance between partners, it serves as a fitting metaphor for the desire of the speaker to be close to God.

Metaphorai and Linguistic Travel

"Vespers" and "Presque Isle" differ from the abundance of poems in the collection where the speaker cannot make out the voice of God, and this difference rests on the actions of the speaker. The speaker encounters God primarily when she leaves her garden. Though these poems involve the speaker moving physically to encounter God, other poems throughout the collection suggest that a kind of movement can be accomplished linguistically, that a bridge between the speaker and God can be constructed through language. For Glück's speaker, linguistic expression indicates her desire to be close to God, as if praising would permit her access to him:

> no one praises
> more intensely than I, with more
> painfully checked desire, or more deserves
> to sit at your right hand, if it exists, partaking
> of the perishable, the immortal fig,
> which does not travel. (278)

Earlier lines, "those / like myself, whom nature forces / into lives of abstinence" reinforce the sexual dynamic and longing of the speaker towards God. The speaker has already introduced John, her husband, and Noah, her son—who is the very product of the speaker's sexual relationship with her husband—yet the speaker considers her life one of abstinence. Her frustration with the inadequacy of her "praising" resembles Levinas's phenomenology of erotic encounters, particularly the phenomenon of a caress. For Levinas, caressing "expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. It is hungry for this very expression, in an unremitting increase of hunger" (Levinas 258). Likewise, the speaker struggles to formulate the words needed to bring her close to God. Much like Levinas's lover, who cannot experience total assimilation with the beloved, the speaker cannot articulate enough to remedy her estrangement from God. In "Vespers: Parousia," Glück writes, "I try to win you back, / that is the point / of the writing" (295). Unlike "win you over," "win you back" implies prior closeness and current estrangement.

Though there is no indication of what caused the human speaker to be banished from God's presence, she hopes, with reservations, that her writing will bring her to sit at God's right hand.

The speaker ventures to describe God via metaphor, which she hopes will bring her closer to God. For Michel de Certeau, metaphor is spatial and serves a transportive function. In his *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Certeau writes, "In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai.* To go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor'—a bus or a train" (115). For Certeau, metaphor resembles these Greek modes of transport because metaphor helps a person to travel from that which is known to an unfamiliar but new understanding of the thing being metaphorized. Glück's speaker utilizes a similar understanding of metaphor as a concept that travels from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In one of the matins poems, she addresses God,

> Are you like the hawthorn tree,
> always the same thing in the same place,
> or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent, first springing up
> a pink spike on the slope behind the daisies,
> and the next year, purple in the rose garden? (255)

If he is like the hawthorn tree, she can understand God as a stable presence, and if he is a foxglove, she can understand his elusiveness. Putting these lines in the form of questions undercuts what is being said, as if nothing has been said yet, as if she is asking for permission to speak. These questions suggest a desire for God to verify these metaphors' accuracy before these lines can be said as statements, but she doesn't receive an answer validating one metaphor or another. Her inability to feel confident in a metaphor for God that resonates leads her to taunt God for his silence and question whether he exists at all:

> You must see
> it is useless to us, this silence that promotes belief
> you must be all things, the foxglove and the hawthorn tree,

> the vulnerable rose and tough daisy—we are left to think
> you couldn't possibly exist" (255)

To the speaker, if God can be metaphorized using all the plants in the garden, his nature would contain contradictions, being "always the same thing in the same place" but also "inconsistent," "vulnerable" but also "tough." Being unable to describe God coherently not only leads the speaker to doubt his existence but also underscores the gap between them by limiting the ability of her language to help shorten the distance.

After deciding that the garden is unable to provide a satisfying metaphor for God, the speaker reconsiders him in terms beyond the scope of her garden. Instead of plucking foxgloves and roses for metaphors, she abandons those concrete, earthly images for more nebulous, amorphous concepts, which suggests that her evolving idea of God is more intangible than she previously thought. She supposes that light—formless but still perceivable—can signify God:

> Because
> I need you, you appear to me, not
> often, however. I live essentially
> in darkness. You are perhaps training me to be
> responsive to the slightest brightening. (285)

But light is visible, something that God is most often not, at least from the vantage point of the speaker. In "The White Rose," the speaker complicates the notion that God should even be thought of as light and entertains a negative theology:

> Though I call out to you in the night:
> I am not like you, I have only
> my body for a voice; I can't
> disappear into silence—
> . . .
> whiteness steadily absorbed into darkness
> as though you were making a sign after all
> . . .
> or to show me you are not the light I called to

but the blackness behind it. (289)

Here, the speaker realizes that the light she called to is perhaps only her projection of God, and that the blackness behind it, that which has not been sufficiently illuminated, houses God. The speaker struggles to accept God's silence and blackness—perhaps because silence and blackness suggest the possibility of sound and illumination. God as silence and blackness does not feel satisfying to her, as they indicate a lacuna rather than a being. She fumbles to describe the substantive yet elusive nature of God:

> What a nothing you were,
> to be changed so quickly
> into an image, an odor—you are everywhere, source
> of wisdom and anguish. (295)

Here, there is a shift from concrete entities to more nebulous or abstract phenomena. Light, darkness, absence, and odor are diffuse: it is more difficult to pin down their exact location or bounds than it is to locate something as concrete as a flower or tree. These metaphors confirm the narrator's sensation of disorientation, her not knowing where she is in relation to God.

The string of metaphors initially suggests that no metaphors can bring her closer to understanding God. The narrator continuously edits her descriptions of God, revealing her continuing disorientation and also a worry that her linguistic constructions might not accurately describe him. These concerns don't lead her to cease speech, but rather propel her to keep speaking in hopes that she will eventually find the right words to describe God. Glück invites the reader to participate in this linguistic anxiety by leading the reader through the speaker's effort to find metaphors rather than presenting the reader with a ready-made metaphor for God. The speaker's constant subversion and doubt of previous linguistic constructions of God simultaneously suggests that God is either a plurality of description or beyond description. Glück writes that the speaker, more than others,

> deserves
> to sit at [God's] right hand, if it exists, partaking
> of the perishable, the immortal fig,
> which does not travel. (278)

Here, Glück's use of contrary descriptions, "perishable" and "immortal," differ from her previous use of contradictory metaphors (light and dark, foxglove and rose) in that they are more intensely juxtaposed: instead of merely occurring within the same poem, they are placed immediately one after the other on the very same line, revealing a stark incompatibility. Here, the human speaker experiences something similar to what Levinas describes in the erotic encounter: The beloved is "a 'non-signifying' and raw density, an exorbitant ultramateriality. These superlatives, better than metaphors, denote a sort of paroxysm of materiality" (256). Glück's narrator experiences this paroxysm of materiality by supposing God "must be all things," nearly being at a loss for words (278). Inevitably, God surpasses the contours of what the speaker's language constructs. The speaker's language doesn't catch up to her desire for him, much like Levinas's lover is unable to express, or capture, the essence of the beloved in their entirety: "The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches, it forages" (257). In her continual attempts to speak about and to God, the speaker enacts the foraging—to borrow Levinas's term with fortuitously botanical connotations—involved in finding language for God. This foraging, though not culminating in total knowledge of God, progresses to a point where the speaker's descriptions of God aligns with God's description of himself. As in the case of the speaker's earlier comparison of God to light, God also makes these metaphors of absence and light for himself:

> If you would open your eyes
> you would see me, you would see

> the emptiness of heaven
> mirrored on earth, the fields
> vacant again, lifeless, covered with snow—
> then white light
> no longer disguised as matter. (283)

The speaker is unaware of that alignment, and continues speaking without knowing her progress. Though this ignorance causes the speaker frustration, it allows her to speak without dependence on God's affirmation.

Glück's human speaker sometimes grows exasperated with her linguistic explorations because they don't always elicit a response from God. In "Vespers," she resigns herself to her distance from God:

> Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence
> so it is clear I have no access to you;
> I do not exist for you, you have drawn
> a line through my name. (296)

Here, the silence of God is treated as a kind of response, not an indication of his nonexistence—if anything, the speaker inverts her previous "test" for his existence by supposing her own irrelevance; indeed, instead of supposing that she is undoubtedly a prominent figure in the world, she now sees herself as insignificant. God hears the skittish voice of the speaker and is disappointed by the speaker's skepticism of her own linguistic formulations of him: "You have no faith in your own language" (298). God's disappointment here stems not from the possibility of inaccurate language, but from the speaker's lack of confidence in language at all. If the speaker lacks confidence, her will to linguistically venture to meet him might fade. God laments the disconnect and silence between them, and to remedy this silence, invites and encourages the speaker to speak and write. In "Clear Morning," God expresses frustration with humans expecting God to be revealed through the images of nature:

> And all this time
> I indulged your limitation, thinking
> you would cast it aside yourselves sooner or later,
> thinking matter could not absorb your gaze forever
> . . .
> I cannot go on
> restricting myself to images. (251)

God's distaste for image suggests that he resents pulling all of the weight in their relationship: making himself obvious in the images of nature is one-sided. Perhaps God wants the speaker to use the images God has provided, the raw material available in the natural world, to create metaphors, which take images and assign meaning, allowing the speaker to travel closer. Later in the collection, God expresses delight when the speaker writes without anxiety or fear: "You will never know how deeply / it pleases me to see you sitting there / like independent beings, / . . . holding the pencils I gave you / until the summer morning disappears into writing" (292). God continues, "Creation has brought you / great excitement" (292). Using the word "creation" to describe her writing speaks to her mastery of language, that she is able to form language in such a way that is generative of newness. The word also invokes the biblical creation myth, where God creates the world by speech-act. By inviting the speaker to write, he invites her to participate in the project of creation through her own powerful utterance of language.

Despite the speaker's care to use metaphor to signify or reveal God, the title of the collection brazenly indulges in a natural metaphor for God, which insinuates more confidence than the speaker has throughout the collection itself. Carol Muske notices that "the wild or false iris, pseudacorus, is not cultivated, grows outside the gardener's borders" (52). God, like the wild iris, is beyond the control of the gardener. The wild iris is a perennial, which returns every spring; the lifespan of the wild iris most closely resembles the disappearance and immortality of God. Naming a collection of poetry that explores the foreignness of God after a flower which

uncannily resembles the supposed elusiveness of that same God tempers the speaker's skittishness about metaphor from the outset. The use of this metaphor acts as an ideal in comparison to other metaphors the speaker makes, not only in its accuracy but also in its self-assuredness. Even the speaker's initial premise of praying betrays a confidence in language to mediate her relationship with God, and eventually her relationship with God becomes more secure, suggesting that writing and speaking succeed in bringing her and God closer together, even if not adequately or completely closing the gap between them.

Poetic Utterance and Revelation of Alterity

Naming the collection *The Wild Iris* brings into relief the effort involved in gardening as opposed to the spontaneous flourishing of wild plants. As David Baker observes, "a garden is nature shaped into a human design" (189). Gardening is a kind of creation: the speaker has inherited the raw materials of nature—water, seeds, soil—but the garden requires her ordering to exist as a garden. Likewise, the human speaker inherits language—perhaps from God himself, as "Retreating Light" suggests when God admires the speaker holding the pencils given them—and creates poetry, prayers, with them. The speaker reports discouragement in both her gardening and linguistic endeavors, suggesting an analogy between the two. The speaker's tomato plants are failing, and she initially blames it on God:

> You should withhold
> the heavy rains, the cold nights that come
> so often here, while other regions get
> twelve weeks of summer. All this belongs to you. (Glück 279)

But she reclaims her contribution to the garden, even a failing one:

> On the other hand,
> I planted the seeds, I watched the first shoots
> like wings tearing the soil

. . .
I am responsible
for these vines. (279)

Likewise, she initially faults God for not making himself known, but as the collection progresses, she works with God's elusiveness by continuing to speak.

The speaker alternates between hope and doubt in language's ability to bring herself closer to God, and this dual attitude towards language aligns with Certeau's theory of narrative language. For Certeau, language marks a frontier, a liminal space between what is familiar and what is foreign. In the case of *The Wild Iris*, this space manifests as the alienation between the speaker and God. Certeau recognizes the impulse to linguistically "fill in and build up the space in between" the familiar and foreign, to mark concretely what is the self and what is other. Glück's speaker initially has a similar impulse, demanding that God make himself manifest so that she can know where and what he is. Certeau identifies another use of language, one that does not fill in the space between the familiar and foreign, but instead "privileges a 'logic of ambiguity'" and functions as a bridge (128). Certeau refers to this use of language as "narrative," which is the space where one can encounter the unfamiliar:

> At the same time as [the bridge] offers the possibility of a bewildering exteriority, it allows or causes the re-emergence beyond the frontiers of the alien element that was controlled in the interior, and gives objectivity (that is, expression and representation) to the alterity … as though through delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its other. (128-29)

Certeau's use of the term "frontier" connotes permeability in a way that "border" does not. Frontiers invite movement and negotiation, while borders keep one in or out. If narrative—and as *The Wild Iris* seems to argue, poetic language—delimit the self and God, they also allow for the emergence of God. In this conception of narrative, delimition, or articulation, is what allows alterity to be made manifest. In *The Wild Iris*, God seems to be promoting the speaker's use of

language so that she can see what is "other" to her, namely God. God's silence isn't the silence of withholding speech, but the absence of a linguistic "bridge" connecting the speaker to him. God is named as one who is distant, but naming that space also makes that space navigable. Language in this sense is capable of illuminating the space between the speaker and God, but does not erase that space, preventing the speaker from subsuming God into her own projection.

The Wild Iris demonstrates that a subject's words can illuminate the existence of an other while preserving their alterity. Other scholars have taken stock of the speaker's attempts to animate alterity, though their interpretations find the speaker unable to transcend her own narcissism, and suppose she merely puts her own words in God's and the flowers' mouths. Ann Keniston notices Glück's interest in alterity—as documented in Glück's essay "American Narcissism"—at play in *The Wild Iris*. Keniston sees in *The Wild Iris* a preoccupation with "disturbances in the self-other bond and in particular on the impossibility of representing an other who is truly distinct from the speaker describing him" (75). In "American Narcissism," Glück diagnoses American lyric poetry as solipsistic but acknowledges its seduction. Keniston ultimately argues that the speaker of *The Wild Iris* commits the very sin "American Narcissism" outlines, and further, that "*The Wild Iris* reveals narcissism to be essential to and productive for poetic utterance" (76). In Keniston's interpretation, the speaker of the collection has not made a breakthrough in reaching God but has created God in her own image. Keniston's interpretation reads the collection as employing the type of language that Certeau would argue "fill[s] in and build[s] up the space in between" the speaker and God, using language to establish a barrier. In Carol Muske's estimation of the collection, the speaker is a ventriloquist, projecting her own voice onto the flowers. Muske, like Keniston, sees the speaker of the collection as one who puts her own words into others'—whether they be flowers' or God's—mouths. But Muske invokes

Wordsworth: “Nature is both inherently alive and representative of the soul's subjective animation--the world, Wordsworth says, which we half-perceive and half-create” (52). In a Wordsworthian view, the speaker is not entirely a ventriloquist, but a co-creator with something outside herself. This possible reading, of the speaker occupying a place between the solely narcissistic projection Keniston and Muske see, and the parallel conversations that Bidart sees, is murky, as there isn’t a single answer as to who the speaker of a given poem is. This reading would explain the kind of contentment the speaker expresses near the end of the collection. Keniston and Muske’s interpretation of the speaker creating God through her own language could be read as a triumph of the human capacity for invention, but it doesn’t seem a satisfying answer to the desolate loneliness and erotic longing throughout the collection, desires that require an other. In my reading, the speaker finds contentment at the end of the collection because of her own linguistic constructions leading to the recognition of God’s alterity.

The speaker’s linguistic attempts to make God in her image fail. Near the beginning of the collection, the speaker supposed that she needed to know God’s character in order to be close to him, but her prayers—an alchemy between her own words and God’s revelation—succeed in bringing her closer to God. Near the end of the collection, though the speaker has no new knowledge about the nature of God, she is confident in where he is: “I don’t wonder where you are anymore. / You’re in the garden; you’re where John is” (284). The speaker is content to know that God is near, rather than knowing more about him. She admits, “I am ashamed at what I thought you were, distant from us” (284). Here, it is curious that instead of saying “*where* I thought you were,” she says, “*what* I thought you were,” as if one of God’s essential attributes is one who is distant, as opposed to God incidentally being distant. Even at the end of the collection

she has no “definition” of God, but her petitions seem to have nevertheless soothed her desire for closeness.

For language, there is a success in enacting a desire for God, rather than mere description of him, as it builds or enacts the relationship itself. God’s presence manifests itself, although dimly, through humans’ linguistic endeavors:

> My tenderness
> should be apparent to you
> in the breeze of the summer evening and in the words that become
> your own response. (298)

In reference to these lines, Davis writes, “the suggestion is that words spoken in prayers or poems—in prayers that are poems or poems that are prayers—are simultaneously both appeal and answer, that they come from one and the same "source," and that they "speak" to one another—even if only in the silence of thought or of image” (53). Keniston and Muske are correct when they suppose that the poems voiced by God or the flowers could actually be voiced by the human speaker, but I argue this ventriloquist act does not originate solely from a place of narcissism but from closeness with God and the garden. Grossman writes, “The function of poetry is to obtain for everybody one kind of success at the limits of the autonomy of the will,” one of these limits being “the barriers against access to other consciousnesses” (209). Though this boundary cannot be crossed, poetry can bring us to the edge of it, providing “one kind of success” in communing with God, by even making him appear to us. God tells the speaker, “I summoned you into existence / by opening my mouth” (301). Though this is a reference to the creation story in Genesis, it also hints at what the religious do in praying—bringing God into practical existence by speaking of him.

Conclusion

In the last poem of the collection, the speaker's lover says, "Hush, beloved" (303). If the lover is a metaphor for God, and God has previously encouraged the speaker to speak, it seems strange to now encourage silence. But perhaps God's hush, after all the speaker's prayers, is an assurance that he is nearby, that there is no need to call out now. If the necessity of speech arises from a dislocation between subject and object, perhaps between "a god and his world," as Grossman would have it, communion between the god and the speaker of *The Wild Iris* would not necessitate speech, at least for a time.

If the wild iris is a figure for God, and the human speaker is a gardener, there is danger that the human speaker will domesticate God, as to have him encapsulated by language would make him less "wild." But beneath the human speaker's provocations toward God are hopes that he will make himself known, and she desires the kind of relationship with him that requires her relinquishment of total control over her idea of him, and even anticipates that her narcissistic projection will yield truth that comes from God himself. She seems aware that her language is inadequate to describe God, perhaps out of a recognition that God exceeds her language for him. Nevertheless, she continues to speak, finding that even as her descriptions of God fall short of his entirety, and do not always elicit responses from him, she succeeds in worshiping him, even if by merely linguistically searching for him. In Kimberly Johnson's introduction to *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry*, she writes of devotional lyric that addresses God without response: "in the absence of reply we focus instead on the act of the offering" (xxx). Louise Glück's poetic trademark is her oracle-like voice, and her human speaker is able to embody divine and natural voices by a kind of projection that opens herself to "bewildering exteriority," to use Certeau's phrasing, by venturing to speak of, and to, God.

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