With *The Wild Iris* Louise Glück has detailed her own idea of the imperfect, divine garden and its subjects. The scenario Glück creates is an imitation of her nuclear family, making the myth of the garden her own. We are told of three people who work in the garden: the husband John, the son Noah, and the unnamed narrator, who can only be presumed to be a representation of Glück herself. The family is cut off from the outside world, their entire being and existence contained within the garden.

Glück has described the myth of the garden as “tragic” and this is what she delivers poetically (*Proofs* 53). Glück creates her modern version of the garden of Eden and Eve and assigns her speaker with her own concerns. She creates a drama with the collection, assigning roles to those in the garden. The woman is the only human with a distinctive voice, and the husband and son’s words are only delivered through her. She speaks in prayer sequences titled “Matins” and “Vespers” which refer to traditional prayer hours. These prayers are aimed at a god that in his turn speaks in poems such as “April” and “End of Winter.” Even the flowers in the garden have voices, delivering critique in poems such as “Daisies” and “Scilla.” Nothing spoken reaches the intended audience and this adds to the separation between the human speaker and her surroundings. This separation is firm and is maintained throughout, it is even striven after. The situation is aptly described by the god in “April”:

*No one’s despair is like my despair—*

You have no place in this garden thinking such things, producing
the tiresome outward signs; the man
pointedly weeding an entire forest,
the woman limping, refusing to change clothes
or wash her hair.

While the husband and son focus on using the soil they have been given, the speaker refuses to contribute to their work and communicate with her family. The first quoted line is a reference to one of the speaker’s lamentations, and while the god perceives it as “tiresome” it is part of the speaker’s way of showing her devotion. Her refusal to contribute to the garden is the speaker’s own way of reacting to the situation. Instead of adapting to the garden, the speaker acts devotionally, she says in “Vespers” (38), “I am uniquely / suited to praise you” and this is what she spends her time doing, despite the lack of response. The speaker is the only one with explicit wants and desires, and the only one who refuses to act as she is expected to.

In Glück’s own words poems “must, on whatever scale, dislodge assumption, not by simply opposing it, but by dismantling the systematic proof in which its inevitability is grounded” (Proofs 94). This opposition is not only present in the way she constructs her world, but also in what her main speaker does: in her speaker’s refusal to adjust and act. What appears as passive to her god and her family is her own way of devoting herself. She chooses to exile herself from her surroundings, refuses to change and remains unwilling to lay her mark on the garden. Her actions consist of prayers and writing, things that do not contribute to the garden. All that she chooses to do is non-standard, unexpected.

This form of passivity permeates the collection. Instead of visibly acting the speaker in the background prioritizing devotion despite the resulting appearance of passivity. In fact, the passivity is not so much a consequence as it is a goal. The speaker knows that the gardening is a distraction and refuses to comply. And so, all she does is demand validation for herself, and that is all she seeks; all she will accept. With her modern myth Glück creates a defense for passivity and chastises traditional concepts of progress.

Overheard voices and failed communications

One of the most notable aspects of Glück’s collection is the split perspectives, the
multiple voices, and the way they are all limited to the garden. Glück not only has a human speaker but she gives voices to the plants in the garden and to the god her speaker prays to. As Waltraud Mitgutsh argues, all these voices allow Glück to create “a closed universe where objective reality and her dream-world coalesce, often a world out of time and space, a mythic world, a huge projection of an inner world” (143). We are given many poems spoken from various flowers, and many spoken by the god and the woman in the garden that help build Glück’s world and mythology. These voices are important because they allow for other perspectives, other points of view. Each voice has its own poem and its own perspective, revealing more angles on Glück’s world. The voices also allow the reader to be involved with what is going on, to create a context for her speaker’s lamentations. The presence of these voices is the reason we know that the speaker’s attempts to contact her god are in vain; that there is no progress to be had.

We know that the speaker is aiming her words and her voice to her god because of the titles Glück has chosen. Each time the speaker seeks contact, she does so in poems entitled “Matins” and “Vespers.” These names invoke two of the traditional hours of prayer, representing morning and night prayers. From her devotional address, it is undeniable that she speaks to her god. Cates explains that the god Glück depicts is “a version of her own poetic voice” (466); the god that speaks to his subjects belongs exclusively to The Wild Iris. There is no affiliation with any particular religion, rather, the deity is a representation of Glück’s own power within the creation. But the god is more than that, he also involves readers in the narrative by serving as their perspective. In this way, the speaker’s prayers turn into confessions to the reader, and to her god.

Willard Spiegelman claims that Glück “complicates or blurs issues of identity” (5), and that she does so especially when it comes to her god. As much as the readers would be aware that the speaker is not aiming her prayers at them, there is still the matter that she addresses a “you.” While the speaker is not praying to those reading, she is on a level still speaking to them. More than this, Glück attributes her god with a perspective the readers may share. In “April,” the god asks “Do you suppose I care, if you speak to one another?” Cates points out that this illustrates the god’s indifference regarding the humans’ situation (467). Just like the readers, he has no incentive to care whether the communication pulls through or not. Additionally, Nick Halpern
claims that: “There are certain novelists who turn their readers into one more character. Glück does that” (5). As the god appears to shares the readers’ critiques, having to be convinced to care about his own subjects, he and his voice serve as a tool to transform the readers into characters.

The blurring of identity does not just concern the speaker’s speech and the god’s perspective. In “Daisies” the flowers take on an accusatory tone, saying:

Go ahead: say what you’re thinking. The garden is not the real world. Machines are the real world. Say frankly what any fool could read in your face: it makes sense to avoid us, to resist nostalgia.

This is presumably aimed at the speaker, accusing her of refusing to act as the garden is not “real” enough for her; it is not what she perceives as “real.” However, this could easily also be an accusation aimed at the reader. Glück’s garden is not “the real world” of the reader, but this does not mean they should not get involved.

By turning the reader into another character, there is yet another layer of ambiguity and miscommunication added. There is an illusion of control, as the reader is allowed to perceive the bigger picture through the eyes of the god. The readers cannot interfere with the world of the poem, and while all the perspectives and voices are available to them it is impossible to provide the speaker with them; it is impossible to connect the voices with the listeners. This is not to say that there are no responses, only that they are not heard. The god does respond, but not in a way that the speaker hears or acknowledges, as it does not conform to her wishes. In “April” he says: “I expected better of two creatures / who were given minds,” in an obvious disapproval of her passivity and refusal to communicate with her husband. This is key; that she refuses to hear what she does not want to. Her prayers seek contact and communication with the god, but when he speaks to her she does not hear it as it does not support her behavior.

Of all the voices present, if one were to succeed to break through, the god’s inherent power would make his voice the most likely candidate. Even with the speaker’s refusal to acknowledge that which does not fit her needs it seems his power would surpass hers. Yet, even the god exhibits hesitation on whether he will be heard.
or not. His voice is that which would be expected to be heard, not only because of the inherent power he possesses, but also because of the speaker’s desire to hear him respond, and attention to anything he may express. There is an assumption that there is an audience in his speeches as they are addressed to a “you.” However, uncertainty about whether anyone is actually listening is still prevalent. When the god reprimands the speaker in “April” he says, “I mean you to know / I expected better” and Cates points to the first clause as omissible were the god certain that he would be heard (468). As the speaker never hears this reprimand his reason to doubt is confirmed. It is debatable whether the god’s voice was ever clear. In “End of Winter” the god claims that his voice will no longer be heard “clearly again” but even this is just another of his attempts to communicate that go awry.

It is not just that the god cannot make himself heard properly; he cannot hear what the speaker has to say either, not without warping her voice. In “Retreating Light” the god says:

You will never know how deeply
it pleases me to see you sitting there
like independent beings,
to see you dreaming by the open window,
holding the pencils I gave you
until the summer morning disappears into writing.

Creation has brought you
great excitement, as I knew it would,
as it does in the beginning.
And I am free to do as I please now,
to attend to other things, in confidence
you have no need of me anymore.

This is essentially the opposite of what the speaker consistently expresses. The speaker’s need is particularly notable in “Vespers: Parousia” where she tells the god: “I try to win you back, / that is the point / of the writing” and in “Vespers” (43) in which she laments herself and questions her god:

I live essentially
in darkness. You are perhaps training me to be
responsive to the slightest brightening. Or, like the poets,
are you stimulated by despair, does grief
move you to reveal your nature?

She is waiting for him to appear, to make himself known, and tries to find reasoning
behind his absence, speculating that he is “training” her, and wondering if more “despair” and “grief” would lead him to appear. In fact, he is not silent, she just fails to hear his voice, and fails to make herself heard. This distance that Glück creates and maintains only serves to underline how pointless and unproductive her speaker’s lamentations are. The imagined “training” is just that, imagined, and the speaker’s “grief” and “despair” will not cause a revelation. The god’s false confidence, that there is no need for him anymore, speaks volumes of the miscommunication and misunderstanding present. If even the god the speaker prays to misconstrues her behavior and prayers, there is no hope for her to achieve the contact she appears to so desperately need.

By letting readers overhear all that everyone has to say, and witnessing the failures of communication and progress, they are discomforted. If only the woman’s perspective had been present it may have seemed as if she were obsessed with the garden, and prayer in general. By adding the flowers and the god’s words Glück builds a landscape that allows for a context of the speaker’s refusal to act. The void created from the failed communications serves a purpose as well. Glück is herself “attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid … deliberate silence” because “such works inevitably allude to larger contexts” (Proofs 73). Glück intends the distancing as this refusal to hear allows for a larger context to grow. There is more to the world she has created than the garden; she just does not show it. The speaker even says in “Vespers” (55): “Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence” as if the silence is in itself a character. Glück chooses to capture a silence with her words, with her poems, in this way she emphasizes and supports the passivity that permeates the speaker’s world.

Glück has said, “my preference, from the beginning, has been the poetry that requests or craves a listener” (Proofs 9). This explains why there are voices stemming from many directions, each distinct and in need of a listener. But in this case, the need for a listener within the poetry is never fulfilled; the voices pass each other by, creating an absence, a void, where communication would be. As the voices continue to emerge, and crave to be heard, this void is constantly reinforced, strengthening the barrier between each perspective. Because none of the voices are heard and absorbed properly they are present mostly for the benefit of the readers. We become the craved listeners. The voices are there to be heard, and by allowing all the voices to go by unheard and unnoticed, save for the reader, Glück manages “to make distance the
stable absolute” (Upton 97). By creating this expectation of distance a feeling of disconnection looms over her poetry. This is fatal as the purpose of the speaker’s prayers is to seek contact, communication and confirmation. That all voices are disconnected dooms the speaker’s quest from the start. As the thread holding everything together is distance, we know the voices will never connect with their intended listeners. This thoroughly emphasizes that the speaker’s prayers will not lead to progress. But considering the speaker’s perseverance, this silence also reveals that communication may not be the speaker’s ultimate goal.

All voices distinctly pass each other by, and if they are heard they are distorted. This echoes the separation that the speaker has created for herself. This reinforces what Cates believes; “The Wild Iris is a strikingly lonely collection, despite its many voices, because each of its speakers is audible, in the end, only to the reader” (468). This is both despite the numerous voices, and because of them. As all the voices are loud and demanding, craving attention the speakers have no time to listen to one another. There is no discussion, no dialogue between the human, flower and god perspective. The readers become the audience, and they alone are able to access all perspectives and contextualize the utterances; we are left to notice the failures of communication and the devastating silence.

Halpern believes that Glück has done this “to interfere with [readers’] ease and contentment, their innocence, their weightless yes” (4) that is to say, there are consequences for reading. Reading the text involves stepping into it and becoming a part of it. Readers cannot expect to delve into the poetry without accepting some of the weight, without actually experiencing the failures of communication, which is what occurs when the readers are made characters. There is no way to step in without being affected. This is both the cause and the reason for the confessional tone that is present. The perspectives available allow readers to contextualize the speaker’s behavior and piece together the myth, and to understand that the speaker is not just praying to nothing, but is seeking validation and will not stop until she receives what she wants. This silence only drives her further. But there is also the consequence of accepting that witnessing the speaker’s perseverance and loyalty will yield no development. The readers cannot ignore that the speaker’s behavior stalls progress, and that this stalling is the desired result, and they must accept and deal with this perspective.
The attribution of power and the refusal to use it

As the woman speaker is the only human voice directly represented it is easy to assume that she should be the protagonist. By default the one whose voice is the most prominent should be active and powerful, but Glück’s speaker is the opposite. This is mostly notable because Glück has gone through lengths to give her speaker power in her mythology, in her created world, only to have the speaker ignore it. This is to prove that the passive role her speaker shoulders is not due to inability to change, but rather refusal.

The most oblique distribution of power is Glück placing her speaker and her family in a garden, as it automatically places them in control, allotting them a certain amount of power from the onset. Daniel Morris points out that Glück “has chosen to imitate God’s first act after Creation—planting the Garden of Eden” (193), this is an undeniable parallel considering the speaker’s highly devotional stance. The fact that Glück’s world consists of a garden implies power for her subjects; they are the ones tending to the earth, and they are capable of being independent by working with and living off the soil. They are allowed to plant and weed, to choose what stays and what goes; they are allowed to create, build and design life. The speaker says in “Vespers” (37):

> In your extended absence, you permit me
> use of earth, anticipating
> some return on investment. I must report
> failure in my assignment …

Despite the god’s permission and anticipation and the speaker’s desire to contact him, to please him, she fails in doing what he expects of her, or at least what she believes he expects. But the power doesn’t stop with gardening; Helen Vendler believes the collection imitates “a sequence of liturgical rites” (17). There is an implied hierarchy of power in the chain of contact. The speaker prays to her god, and the flowers occasionally communicate with her as if she were their god; and just as the god holds power over the humans, and the humans hold power over the plants. The reverse is also true, as the scillas mock the speaker in their poem, as if they were above her; as if the scillas were her god.

The people are miniature gods of their own in this mythology, with power
over the plants. But only the voiceless men take advantage of the situation. The speaker, whose perspective we share does not make any of these decisions, she stalls instead, and waits for her god to interfere. In fact, her refusal to act seems to be somewhat of a secret to the others; in one of the “Matins” (25) sequences, she says:

You want to know how I spend my time?
I walk the front lawn, pretending
to be weeding. You ought to know
I’m never weeding. On my knees, pulling
clumps of clover from the flower bed: in fact
I’m looking for courage, for some evidence
my life will change, though
it takes forever, checking
each clump for the symbolic
leaf ...

It seems unlikely that the speaker would be pretending to be weeding to her god; rather, it is her husband and son that do not know that she is being unproductive. The illusion is there for them. It is enough for her to know that she is looking for signs and destroying the precious flowerbeds by “pulling clumps” from the soil. She does not need to pretend or defend herself to her god as her acts are devotional in her eyes; she is doing this for her god. Only her voiceless family must be kept in the dark.

It is notable that if the speaker were to accept the task of weeding for what it is, it is possible and even likely that her life would, indeed, change. But while pulling out the clover fits the description of weeding, to her, it is not what she is doing: the weeding is merely an excuse to look for signs. The presence of the weed is not “evidence” enough that something needs to be done, as it requires action. It does not mean the garden needs tending to, but rather that there may be a lucky four clover buried among the weeds. She has to tolerate the weeds and persevere because of them, their presence should not coax her into action. The point is not for her to change, but for her to persevere. She cannot take the absence of signs as a hint to give up. Rather, she must continue to make a martyr of herself, to suffer and to look for something that is not there instead of weeding. In the poem she makes a point of showing off her hands, describing them as “empty” as if this were a victory. Her question at the end of the poem is: “Or was the point always / to continue without a sign?” and it seems from her own actions that the question is rhetorical, and the answer she seeks is ‘yes’.

The fact that the speaker pretends to do things in front of others is evidence that she is not incapable of acting, only unwilling. On the few occasions that she steps
outside of her comfort zone and gardens, she uses her actions as calls for a divine intervention, for her deity to swoop down and make himself known. One of the “Vespers” (37) illustrates what happens when the speaker does take action. In this case she plants tomatoes. She fails, and is devastated, and she not only blames God for her failure, but also for encouraging her to begin with:

I think I should not be encouraged to grow tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold the heavy rains, the cold nights that come so often here, while other regions get twelve weeks of summer.

Even her failure does not belong to her, but rather the world. In fact, she even goes on to say: “All this / belongs to you.” It is as if she cannot claim responsibility for creation and failure, as creation is not her purpose to begin with. It is unimaginable that the “cold nights” and “heavy rains” are a test from her god, instead they must be a conspiracy, a sign for her to stop. They are there to prove to her that she should not be taking on such enterprises.

Planting the seeds pained the speaker even before any signs of failure were apparent. She describes “the first shoots / like wings tearing the soil,” even the birth being painful, and the shoots taking the shape of wings as if they were prepared to leave the proverbial nest. The shoots do what she is unwilling to; they break free and tear the soil, fulfilling their purpose. Even they do not succeed as the leaves soon are spotted and ruined, and her expectations are fulfilled. The plant’s failure to break free only reinforces her decision not to. She was prepared with scolding words to her god. She knew how he had failed her because she was expecting it. She does not have “twelve weeks of summer” and should not be expected to succeed. Her attempts at acting within the garden do not succeed as they should, and therefore she has found another excuse for herself when it comes to acting as expected. The tomato plants meant to provide nourishment rather than act as simple decoration also illustrates the impossibility of growth. Even the plants needed for survival cannot be produced—at least not by the speaker.

In the end, however, the speaker claims “I am responsible / for these vines.” She claims responsibility for vines that she has not planted, but that by their nature cover and isolate. In fact, it is arguable that she is not necessarily responsible for the vines, but responsible for their support, the metaphorical wall they cover. She has not
planted them, but they cannot grow tall unless there is something for them to cover, and so she is in fact, claiming responsibility for her refusal to change. Additionally, as their role is to separate, she claims responsibility for the divide present between herself and her surroundings. It is by choice that she has separated herself from the others and refuses to accept roles, something which will be discussed later.

In the poem directly preceding it, which is another “Vespers” (36) the speaker plants a fig tree as a test to see if her god exists. When it fails to grow she refuses to accept the results of her test, blaming the cold climate. She even says: “By this logic, you do not exist. Or you exist / exclusively in warmer climates ...” automatically dismissing her own research, blaming the climate. It is likely that she performed the test to begin with because she knew it would fail; because she knew she could blame the climate. Receiving signs leaves her refusing to accept them when they do not conform to her expectations. She consistently chooses to believe, despite contradicting results of tests she performs herself. Aside from the tomato plant, this is the only gardening task the speaker takes on.

The power the people possess is not limited to the garden and planting. The god attempts to provide more power outside of the field of gardening. In “Retreating Light” we are shown a milder god, he reflects on his withdrawal from the garden:

So I gave you the pencil and paper.
I gave you pens made of reeds
I had gathered myself, afternoons in the dense meadows.
I told you, write your own story.

After all those years of listening
I thought you’d know
what a story was.

All you could do was weep.
You wanted everything told to you
and nothing thought through yourselves.

He is not reprimanding them into writing, but rather urging them to take creation into their own hands so they can be independent, have their own thoughts and their own stories. He continues:

So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies,
because apparently the tools alone weren’t enough.
You will never know how deeply it pleases me to see you sitting there like independent beings, to see you dreaming by the open window, holding the pencils I gave you until the summer morning disappears into writing.

It is noteworthy that the god refers to his subjects in plural; he has given them all these “lives” and “tragedies” but our speaker is the only one who refuses to do what she is told. The garden in itself has not been enough. While the men are occupied, the speaker is not engaged with it. She is the main target for the “pencils” and is the only one whose writing we know of. She is the only one choosing to take a different path, and she is the one whose perspective is available, who makes use of the tools of storytelling provided by her god. And while the speaker does use her “tools,” she does not use them to create a story of her own, but rather to establish contact with him again.

The isolation of self and the refusal to merge

Just as the speaker is capable of acting if she wanted, she is capable of creating her own self. This is a power that she does use, but in an unexpected way. Instead of defining herself by what she is, the speaker defines herself by what she is not. She negates her husband and son’s activities, and she carves out a passive role for herself. In his analysis of The Wild Iris, Morris refers to the female speaker as “gardener” and “gardener-poet” but the actuality is that the speaker refuses these roles, and that is the definition of her self. She does not garden, and she does not write—at least, she does not write in the way that is expected from her. She does not write to create an identity for herself, but to contact her god. By doing so she limits herself; she is in the garden, but refuses to garden. And in the same sense, her god gave her tools to write to entertain herself, and she refuses to.

By distancing herself the speaker has limited her role and identity to this, but it is a self-created limitation. Glück has said of herself: “What I could say was no: the way I saw to separate myself, to establish a self with clear boundaries, was to oppose myself to the declared desire of others, utilizing their wills to give shape to my own” (Proofs 10). Glück has given her speaker the same trait, the same desire to carve a role for herself by negation.
In the speaker’s case, this negation is necessary for character formation. Her husband and son, who have accepted their roles in the garden, are no longer depicted as devotional. The physicality of maintaining the garden negates the devotional. Helen Farish explains; “Glück presents the female flesh as ‘interfering’ in the search for a desired full presence or plenitude,” (230). The matter is that the interference of flesh is the interference of physicality. In “April” the god describes the speaker as “limping, refusing to change clothes / or wash her hair.” She denies these physical aspects, does not walk normally and does not conform to the physical expectations of changing clothes and washing. Being active and accepting her role as a gardener the speaker would have to give up the potential of fulfillment. The negation of activity allows her to continue her search for what she considers a “full life.” It is not a question of results, but rather of possibility.

This illustrates awareness on the speaker’s part. She knows what she is doing. To contribute to the garden would force her to become a part of it and attach herself to it. This is the one thing that is clear to us: that the speaker does not want to be part of the bigger picture, as she not only sets herself apart in her god’s eyes, but also separates herself from her family. This is something that the flowers in the garden do not approve of. “Scilla” provides a hostile perspective as the flowers call the speaker “idiot” and reprimand her, asking “why / do you treasure your voice / when to be one thing / is to be next to nothing?” Just because the speaker believes her devotion and prayers set her apart does not mean that they do so. The flowers also pass judgment on her desire to separate herself from those around her. Vendler notes that the scillas urge “her to abandon herself to collective biological beings, to be one of an undifferentiated bed of human flowers” (18). Even the flowers can see that the speaker wants to be different, she is not merely being lazy. According to the flowers however, this desire is the root of her problem.

Less harsh criticism is available in “Daisies” which hints at what the speaker is supposed to want:

And the mind
wants to shine, plainly, as
machines shine, and not
grow deep, as, for example, roots.

It is notable that the daisies believe “the mind wants to shine, plainly,” in other words,
it wants simple things. The comparison to machines implies more simplicity still, as machines are not autonomous but are created; they are the product of someone else’s mind—someone’s who did not shine plainly—and they are programmed, designed, to work a certain way. Just as the machines are meant for certain tasks, the humans in the garden are supposed to work the soil. The particular word usage refers back to the garden: it does not want to “grow deep” as machines do not grow at all. While the garden may contain trees, they are not the main focus of the tending. The flowers are the things that are to be controlled and are also easily uprooted, fragile, compared to trees that have deeply grounded roots. However the speaker does not want to conform to these rules, and this not expected nor appreciated.

This relation to roots relates back to a discussion the speaker has with her son in the first “Matins” (2). In this poem, she identifies with a tree, making herself part of the trunk and connecting to the roots and the life of the tree. Her son reprimands her for doing so:

Noah says this is
an error of depressives, identifying
with a tree, whereas the happy heart
wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for
the part, not the whole.

According to him, remaining with the roots, separating herself from the rest of the garden and craving special attention is a mistake. Her desire to be “whole” and expand along with the tree makes her by his standards a “depressive.” Doing so allows the mind and disease to grow deeper and, essentially, root itself and fan out into the body and the mind. What her son says is what the scillas said: to be a “wave of sky” is better than being one whole thing, which is what the speaker rejects throughout the collection. It is why she refuses to conform and goes against the norm by negating roles.

Passivity as waiting and devotion

The speaker does not technically do nothing, the fact that she speaks and prays is in itself evidence of that. Cates claims that the confinement to the garden allows Glück to create “a myth of the origin of devotion” (465), and the speaker’s few actions illustrate this devotion. But that is not all, she also writes and occasionally plants. She looks for clover, plants tomatoes and performs tests with fig trees. The matter is that
all these actions, in her eyes, are acts of devotion. She stalls, and waits, using the small actions to bring herself closer to what she wants.

Despite the critique that the speaker consistently endures from the plants and from her god, she is the only person allowed to speak. She is the only one given a voice by Glück, and from her god; he says in “Retreating Light” that he handed them all “tools” to write, but she is in fact the only one that uses them. While she does not use them for the intended purpose, she still makes use of the tools in a way that benefits her aim. In “Vespers: Parousia” the speaker discusses the writing, she says: “I try to win you back, / that is the point / of the writing.” There is a strong implication that all the “Matins” and “Vespers” poems have been written prayers. The god’s joy over seeing her finally being productive is nullified at once with this explanation, as her productivity is yet another attempt to communicate with him, another sign of devotion. It is a small act that does not amount to physical productivity and is meant to bring her closer to her god, and retain the possibility of contact.

The title of this particular poem is also revealing, illuminating the context in which the speaker writes. Parousia refers to the arrival of a divine presence, an advent. According to William V. Davis, in this context Parousia signifies an awaited arrival, a presence for the speaker, and he goes on to say that the only arrival is that of absence (52). That this signifier is attached to the last of the prayer-poems attributes weight to all the prayer poems: this is what she has been praying for, this arrival. She is not given the arrival or presence of anything, however. As the speaker says, “Love of my life, you / are lost” and “What a nothing you were, / to be changed so quickly / into an image.” The god’s absence arrived with the gift of writing, and this is where her loyalty begins, her perseverance. The writing, which has been given to her to keep her occupied, is being used to win back the god’s presence. She waits for the god’s presence to be known again, and she will not settle for anything else until it arrives.

Glück’s speaker does not just form her identity by negation, but also by devotion. This devotion is a defining characteristic that, in her opinion, elevates her. In “Vespers” (36) she says, “no one praises / more intensely than I, with more / painfully checked desire, or more deserves / to sit at your right hand.” Her passivity is what is supposed to earn her contact, to earn her this elevation. The intense praising she speaks of is this lack of action, this constant lamentation and praying. The inactivity is a side effect of her devotion in her eyes. She is proud of the consequences
she has brought on herself as they signify loyalty.

This trait, this devotion is also something that allows her to elevate herself. In “Vespers” (43). She openly invites a comparison between herself and Moses, “even as you appeared to Moses, because / I need you, you appear to me.” Her level of devotion is then in her eyes equal to Moses’; she believes she needs her god as much as Moses did, and that she deserves as much attention. Her comparison does not stop there; in the same poem, the speaker describes the field in with imagery reminiscent of the burning bush:

So 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, and beyond, the red sun neither falling  
nor rising—  
I was not a child; I could take advantage of illusions.

The fact that the speaker claims she “could take advantage of illusions,” implies the apparition she describes did not truly occur and that she is acutely aware of it. Her god did not physically step down into the blueberries and make himself known through fire; that is how she chose to interpret the light and the scene. That her depiction bears so much resemblance to Moses’s burning bush emphasizes how deep she feels her needs and convictions are. That she imagines the god’s descent would imply that she, as Moses, was appointed a mission, or that a mission is to come. This particular Vesper supports Morris’s claim that the speaker “imagines the self as unruly, as crossing the border between the human and not human, as under construction, and in a state of becoming” (200). She believes that her devotion, her waiting, earns her this appearance, and allows her to transcend herself.

The purpose of the speaker’s devotion can be unearthed in one of the god’s speeches. In “End of Winter” the god speaks of what had once been. It is not direct, but there is a strong implication that his voice was once a part of the speaker:

never thinking  
this would cost you anything,  
ever imagining the sound of my voice  
as anything but part of you—

The “cost” the god speaks of is the loss of his voice, and it is a consequence of creation. He says, “You wanted to be born I let you be born.” In effect, the creation
was something they wanted, and since the god obliged them they should accept the consequences; they should accept the loss of his voice. The speaker refuses to accept this, by continuing to pray and exhibiting a desire to have her god’s voice available. However, the loss is non-negotiable, as the god says of his voice that:

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 sound that means good-bye, good-bye—
the one continuous line
that binds us to each other.

This statement is a warning, more to the reader than the speaker as the speaker can no longer hear the god’s voice. It is located early in the collection, as if triggering the speaker’s search. It is the god’s way of telling us that the speaker’s attempts will continuously be in vain.

It is important to note that the poem’s title also speaks of what was; “End of Winter” speaks of spring arriving with the poem. This is something that is supposed to be positive, that carries positive implications. Creation and life surfaces along with a warmer climate appropriate for thriving, but this is not something that the speaker can appreciate, as with the spring comes gardening chores and the responsibility of creating and tending to life. It is more than just wanting the voice available; the speaker wants to return to the cold destructive climate, to a past where passivity was acceptable. This desire to return to something less than perfect is confirmed in the first “Matins” (2) where the speaker retells a conversation she has had with her son: “Noah says / depressives hate the spring, imbalance / between the inner and the outer world.” The speaker’s desire to return to the winter is her desire to return to a climate that was a true reflection of her mind, and where gardening cannot be performed.

The numerous voices in *The Wild Iris* are present to illuminate the void, to alert us to the missing audience that is meant to be there. They do not reach those they are meant to, instead the reader is forced to absorb them all and piece together a context. This reveals the impossibility of the speaker’s quest for contact, but also reveals that this quest is not necessarily her ultimate goal. The lack of response she receives serves as
fuel for her mission. The fact that she does not get a response is what continues to drive her. The traditionally desired progress and development is not the purpose of the speaker’s prayers, rather, endurance is. This disrupts common assumptions that productivity is the only option, as the speaker’s aim is the opposite.

Glück goes so far as to call progress “a narrow myth for triumph” (Proofs 54) and so the lack of progress for our speaker does not mean failure. In the context of the garden, the fact that her actions are not standard is the admirable thing. The speaker’s diligence in prayer and her high level of devotion allows her to elevate her character. The speaker has the audacity to remain passive despite the surrounding pressure to garden and encouragement from her god to be creative. The focus lies on what the speaker herself perceives as important. In replacing physical activity and productivity with devotion, the speaker is able to ascend and place herself above others.

The passivity in this The Wild Iris is used as a tool to maintain possibility, and in this way the process is emphasized more than the results. Potential for change and perseverance is what should be treasured rather than concrete progress. In refusing to adapt and going against the norm, choosing passivity, Glück’s speaker still has access to possibility. The potential is what is important, and maintaining its existence is only possible by remaining passive. In this way, Glück has created a defense of her speaker’s unorthodox choices. The speaker may achieve what she wants as long as she does not conform to what is expected.
Works Cited


