
A Thesis

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by

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To

the One True God
Creator of all

May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.
Psalm 19:14 NIV
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INTRODUCTION

Locating a Beginning

In writing about the work of George Oppen, Louise Glück writes what we may almost consider a definition of her latest book, *The Wild Iris*: "To love completion is to love illusion; the art that most engages me is that which contrives to be, simultaneously, whole and not final" (Whole 237). We find in *The Wild Iris* a completion, a finish which is nevertheless not finality. The poetry is a "whole," that is, obviously complete, yet Glück gives the reader wide latitude to participate in the creating. Much modern poetry follows such a course, inviting the reader to participate; however, *The Wild Iris* is particularly compelling in this way. At each reading, we discover more and different relationships among the parts, more nuances and possibilities, more that says "figure me out," "decipher me," "discover meaning." Because of the complexities of interrelatedness, we engage more wholeheartedly in finding meaning, in participating in the creation process. In this set of poems, Glück has
continued her reworking of confessionalism, retaining the familial and personal concerns of her literary predecessors while reworking the tradition as a whole. Her lyrics allow for reconciliation and reunion rather than merely displaying discord and disunion in all their gory detail. In Chapter Three I will focus more closely on how Glück reworks confessionalism, her poetry remaining accessible to her readers' various backgrounds and experiences while at the same time, in some sense, "confessing."

The Wild Iris is more than just a collection of distinct lyrics. Rather than considering just the individual poems, we can distinguish four main groups of poems: the prayer poems of the woman ("Matins" and "Vespers"), those in the flower voices, in God's voice, and in the woman's voice (not specifically addressed to God). These groupings, as well as the individual poems, connect and disconnect and reconnect, their ideas intertwining, so that taken as a whole the book says and does more than the sum of its individual components. The linear movement of the book from the first poem to the last takes us through one seasonal cycle, from early spring to autumn; however, within the book all is cyclical, forming a balance between speech and silence, life and death, creating and being
created. A multitude of voices crowd each other, adding, deleting, and changing what has been spoken already; meanings merge and separate only to re-emerge with slight variations. In all this vast array of possibility, a soul forms. Glück defines that soul, that Self, by asking what it means to have a soul and to live alongside and in communication with other Selves.

At the very heart of selfhood is the moment of creation, or of birth. Thus, and not surprisingly, the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden colors the poems. On one level, the woman can—and does—represent Eve, first woman. But she also represents all women, participating in a "fall" which, though not explicitly a moral one, echoes the error of Eden and its consequences for daily life. The lines of interrelationship between levels and between selves, however, resist scrutiny, shifting, melding and fragmenting so that in any given instance the speaker and the listener within the poems transpose repeatedly. The woman is at once woman-child, woman-gardener, and woman-god. She functions simultaneously as daughter, mother-caretaker, and creator.

Thus it becomes impossible to separate the voices in specific poems into one speaker or another. Rather,
we find layers of meaning spoken in different voices, and sorting out the image of one particular self becomes nearly impossible. Do we consider only the "Vespers" and "Matins" poems in order to construct the self of the woman? Or must we also include those poems which seem to illustrate the poet's literal daily life, including references to her husband and son? Then, too, the flower poems read as a commentary upon the nature of humanness; they tell something of what it means to be human and fallen and relating to the divine. They cannot be segregated from the poems spoken by the woman and relegated merely to some preconception about coy flower poems. The last group of poems ostensibly renders the voice of God; however, these poems too could be read as the woman-poet's viewpoint, for they consider such issues as writing and erasing, as well as the pleasure accompanying such an act of creation. Taken as a whole, the poems do not detail a specific individual's experiences; rather, Glück creates an archetype: the "I" in the poems is on one level a unique individual (a poet with a husband and a son), yet she hides behind the nameless, faceless self-disclosing not so much her self as the Self, the what-it-means-to-be-human Self.
This Self faces daily the necessity of relating to others, and to an Other, God, who is omnipresent in her world. Part of defining the Self involves balancing independence with dependence, remaining an individual without losing all connection to other selves. In *Mythologies of Nothing*, Anthony Libby writes:

Post-Romantic poets feel the need, as always, to define man's relation to that which is not man, but they must do so in a world increasingly characterized by discontinuity, separation of all sorts, what Williams laments as 'divorce.' (19)

*The Wild Iris* in one sense represents not divorce, but intense union—we cannot easily separate the voices, and the levels of meaning overlap and intrude on one another. Yet the book as a whole is about disinheritances—or what we might call divorces—and the attempts at reconciliation which follow. The cyclical nature of the poems means that this happens not just once, but over and over again.

Our difficulty as Glück's readers lies in attempting to impose structure and order on the poems; the mind can grasp the intricate interworkings in an intuitive, perhaps multi-dimensional way. And so we must look at the poems as a whole, with all their slipperiness, and from their assertions and retractions and tentativeness try to discover what it means to be a
Self in relation to and speaking to God, finding for ourselves the tension which holds opposites in the necessary balance. Thus, the logical place to begin is at the beginning, which is also, in a sense, the ending.

The book begins and ends with the "death" of existence as a bulb buried in the earth. The wild iris, who speaks first, makes use of its new-found voice to share its birth experience: "At the end of my suffering/there was a door./Hear me out: that which you call death/I remember." Birth in this instance ends the suffering of existing "as consciousness/buried in the dark earth." In separating from the earth, growing up through it, the iris has gained its voice. What it chooses to speak of includes the whole experience of its pain and separation—the process whereby it acquired its voice. This is the first instance of disinherition in the volume; the separation from the dark earth and the pain of this process enable the iris to communicate, to share in verbal form its experiences of life thus far. In speaking, the iris reveals the cyclical nature of its life: "whatever/returns from oblivion returns/to find a voice," the repeated "returns" emphasizing that this is neither its first nor its last instance of disinherition.
In this initial instance of disinheritance, we do not see the agent of the separation, nor do we see all of the consequences. All we can know at this point is that self-hood, being a soul, requires that one individuate, becoming a person distinct from one's origins. The iris itself alerts us to the fact that its life parallels ours in this way: "that which you fear, being/a soul and unable to speak," "you who do not remember passage from the other world." These lines evoke mute, prenatal life, so that for us as well as for the flowers, birth is the first moment of disinheritance and provides the opportunity for a voice.

On the most obvious level, the woman's disinheritance is a separation from God. As part of creation, she is subject to the Fall (precipitated by Eve), and to the disinheritance which that brings. In "Matins" (#2) she calls God "unreachable father." Later, in "Vespers" (#9) she says, "your voice is gone now; I hardly hear you." Her disinheritance has raised a barrier between herself and God. "Matins" (#4) explains the situation a bit further:

I see it is with you as with the birches:
I am not to speak to you
in the personal way. Much
has passed between us. Or
was it always only
on the one side? I am at fault, at fault, I asked you to be human--I am no needier than other people. But the absence of all feeling, of the least concern for me... 

Because of the woman's disinheritance, she may not speak personally to God. But part of the problem is that she has asked God to be human, which is to say less than divine, less than perfect, fallen as she is fallen, and thus less rather than more connected to her. Two imperfect beings will relate more imperfectly, will be further apart, separated by the insurmountable barrier of doubled imperfection, than will a pair formed of one imperfect and one perfect being, a situation in which at least one party may overcome the difficulty. The woman's own language, the very fact that she offers this complaint, demonstrates her neediness for some personal contact with God, the neediness she attempts to deny or gloss over; she may be "no needier" than others, but she is at least as needy, requiring not only a personal touch, but also communication, presence, the voice of God in answer to her own voice. In separating from God, in speaking as a disinherited self, she has learned something about herself--or she could learn something if she would listen to what she is saying.
Because she has no unity with God, because she is an entity on her own, she is confused about the nature of God: is he absent, merely silent, or just slightly withdrawn? All three possibilities are present in the woman's prayers, as she alternates between anger at his presumed abandonment of her and despair over his inaccessibility and inconsistency. She tries to resolve this confusion and uncertainty by comparing him to that which she knows well—the flowers she sees in her garden: "Are you like the hawthorn tree, / always the same thing in the same place, / or are you more the foxglove, inconsistent . . . ?" ("Matins" #3). Always she sees her answer as silence, the silence of an absolute departure. In "Vespers" (#9) she illustrates the situation as she perceives it:

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.

... When you go, you go absolutely, deducting visible life from all things but not all life, lest we turn from you.

The silence here communicates: it "talks" in some—at least vaguely—understandable way, and it shares God's inaccessibility. Two difficulties impede the speaker's access to God. On her end of the conversation, she
cannot communicate paradoxically as God can, in speech that is silent; for her, speech and silence mutually exclude one another. Because her mode of communication differs from God's, she is unable to respond to his presumably meaningful silence. From God's side, communication disintegrates because the woman is a non-entity. God can speak only to something that actually exists; if a line has been drawn through one's name, if one's very existence has been negated, then not only is communication impossible, but even the attempt is ridiculous. An excommunication isolates the offender from all society—in this case, from God's presence. The speaker does not reveal any specific reasons for her excommunication, although there are echoes of the original fall of mankind here—God closes off all communion with mankind, "deducting visible life" ("Cursed is the ground because of you" Genesis 3:17) as he does so. However, the disinheritance is not absolute and final: the poet's phrasing here leaves the door open for a possible re-inheritance. God does not deduct all life. If he did so, humans would turn from him, would cease their inquiry into his existence and nature. The woman fails to note that if God did cancel out or deduct all life, then only death would remain, only half of the seasonal cycle would occur—
the speechless half.

This process of disinheritance, linked with attempts and occasional successes at reconciliation, circles throughout the poems, within and among four possible levels: the speaker as Eve, the speaker as woman, the speaker as daughter, and the speaker as poet. Glück's "Self"—composed of the fractures and reunitings among these levels—becomes an archetype of the soul relating to God, the ultimate Other, and finding a balance between complete separation from and complete absorption into that Other, that center of origins. Glück never offers us a tidy resolution or pat answer. Even on a purely physical plane—with the garden's seasonal cycle—the last poem in the book feeds naturally back into the first, and we start the cycle once again. What Glück does offer is an entrance into the cycle, a way in which we may unobtrusively carve a niche for ourselves in this garden of life.

Glück's garden is mythological, whether we define myth in accordance with Ted Spivey's interpretation of Eliade, so that "myth is then a story recording the breakthrough of the sacred into the life of an individual" (x), or whether, with Gordon E. Bigelow, we consider myth "a numinous image or story. 'Numinous' here means having the power to seize men and compel
them to some kind of total response" (80). Really, we may combine the two definitions, for one would assume that if the sacred broke into an individual's life it would certainly be capable of--or at the very least its action would result in--compelling that individual to a total response. In The Wild Iris, we find both the responsive individual--our human speaker--and the sacred, which is at least attempting to break through into the woman's life. As I look more closely at this complex interplay in Chapter One, I will explore the difficulties attendant upon such a mythic vision.

The underlying structure supporting Glück's myth is the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden and the creation of humanity. As I noted earlier, the woman is Eve, the first-born woman, suffering, not because of a physical sin like incest, "but because [she] was born,/ because [she] required life/separate from [God]" ("Early Darkness"). In this, Glück echoes Genesis, for Eve created the separation between herself and God by disobeying his mandate: "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). In Glück's version, we do not know the woman's precise sin, merely that she "required" a separated life, that she chose to go her own way, independent of God. By the time we meet Glück's "Eve" and "God," the
separation has already occurred, and God—at least from Eve’s perspective—no longer walks "in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8) as he used to; he no longer communicates with his human creation. At least, they no longer speak face to face, and their communications are fraught with numerous misunderstandings.

With her self-conscious employment of postlapsarian images, Glück exemplifies the literary purposes for using myth, delineated by Gordon E. Bigelow: myth may be used "as a metaphoric shorthand, as a storehouse of common symbolism, as a vehicle for serious ideas, and as a structural framework" (85). In writing her woman-speaker as an Eve-figure, Glück draws on numerous Biblical and literary traditions. Though The Wild Iris reworks and redefines these—as it must, for "the chief obstacle in writing mythical or archetypal poetry is that the story is already known, its conclusion familiar" (Vendler, Music 438)—its readers come to the poetic "making" with some advance preparation, with the knowledge that more is at stake than the imagined emotions of flowers. We know enough to recognize the Fall's separation, its disinheriting, and to look for reconciliation. We can look at the Fall as a result of sensual seduction, and thus Glück can play with the
idea of incest--too close a relationship with some being other than God--as a possible cause for the woman's suffering. And finally, having the Edenic account as a "structural framework" allows us to avoid focusing solely on the story we already know--the Genesis account--and to discover how the poems depart from it, revising the well-known story for contemporary life and relationships.

Glück's mythology, her garden and its inhabitants, her what-it-means-to-be-a-soul archetype, do not, as we have said, provide any final answers or close off any possibilities. As readers, we must balance our "findings" against our desire to know all (and thus to conclude our search), much as Glück's woman speaker must balance her independence and dependence. We must accept the invitation to discover, to create as we read, and must look not only at the Edenic overtones of *The Wild Iris*, but beyond them and through them. In shaping our findings at least partially on the interrelationships between the poetic levels and layers, we are invited to discover what it means to exist as a soul.
CHAPTER I

Humanity and Divinity

The first way in which to consider the speaker as a Self is on the level of woman—an adult human being resembling, yet not equatable with Eve. On such a level, The Wild Iris enters into a long tradition of prayer poetry, for the "Matins" and "Vespers" of the woman are indeed prayers, as both title and content indicate. Donne and Herbert come most readily to mind, for both poets struggled as Glück does with the relationship of the Self to God. What does it mean for an individual to call God "Lord" and "Father"? Glück departs from the tradition by allowing God to answer, by giving him a voice and a venue. Also, since Glück writes so often from the perspective of the familial, her poetry carries strong overtones of the father-daughter relationship, which I shall address in Chapter Two. The purely human level affects the human-divine level, the juxtaposition and overlap forcing both the human and divine speakers to share the characteristics
of humanity and divinity.

On this human-divine level, the woman's relationship with God follows the cyclical pattern of the whole book: she alternates among the sulkiness of her desires, the despair of her unadmitted neediness, and an acceptance of God's mode of communication. Her moods illustrate her shifts between childish self-centeredness and adult attempts at self-sufficiency, interrupted by an occasional moment of mature acceptance and rationality. In particular, the "Matins" and "Vespers" prayers embody this complex and shifting relationship.

In "Vespers" (#2) the woman speaks from unadmitted need. In complaining to God about the difficulty of her task in life--gardening, in particular, gardening the tomatoes--she protects her sense of self-sufficiency, her sense of control over her own life. In offering complaint, it becomes possible for her not to ask for help. On the one hand, she rather flippantly announces her failure with the tomato plant: "I must report/failure in my assignment, principally/ regarding the tomato plants." At the same time, her voice is querulous: "I think I should not be encouraged to grow/tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold/the heavy rains, the cold nights." I would do
my part, she says, if you would just make my life easy. Her complaint assumes the existence, presence, and listening ear of the God whom she periodically ignores or accuses of negligence.

"Vespers" (#3) resounds with a childish petulance over this imagined negligence: "More than you love me, very possibly/you love the beasts of the field, even,/ possibly, the field itself." Though not exactly a picture of sibling rivalry, still these lines echo the perennial question, "whom do you love the most, Daddy?" By the time we reach "Vespers" (#4), the woman accepts God as he is: "I don't wonder where you are anymore./ You're in the garden." His mode of communicating, a peace which rushes "like bright light through the bare tree," is understandable, and she no longer accuses him of silence or withdrawal. At one point, in "Matins" (#7), she even confesses her own guilt: "I am ashamed/at what I thought you were,/distant from us. . . . dear friend,/dear trembling partner." Her God metamorphoses from an "unreachable father," distant, cold, and silent, to a "dear friend," experiencing similar emotions, appreciating similar sights, and intimately connected. However, as with each prior mood, this more contented one evaporates too. We find no consistent portrait of the personality of God in these poems, from
either the deity's or the woman's perspective.

Though we get no stable sense of the state of affairs between God and woman, the flowers provide additional perspective on her separation from God, on the disunion that afflicts humanity. The trillium says:

I woke up ignorant in a forest;
only a moment ago, I didn't know my voice
if one were given me
would be so full of grief, my sentences
like cries strung together.
I didn't even know I felt grief
until that word came, until I felt
rain streaming from me.

Again we hear an echo of Eden--"I woke up ignorant in a forest"--and of birth. One "wakes" into life as a baby quite without knowledge or speech. The ability to speak reveals to one the grief of life, the feeling of pain. The enjambment in the second line suggests that the trillium, and by extension the woman, didn't experience her own voice, when she first spoke, as uniquely hers, as distinct from other voices or from the giver of voices, which would be the Creator who gave her life. When the word "grief" leaves her lips, it awakens her to the knowledge of her separateness--her "fall"--as well as to the definition of her emotion.
The scilla actually condemn the woman for the disunion—"Not I, you idiot, not self, but we, we"—while at the same time challenging her to consider her situation: "why/do you treasure your voice/when to be one thing/is to be next to nothing?" Self, according to the scilla, is not meant to be the focus of a soul; existence is plural rather than singular. For the scilla, the lives of humans are "solitary" and at the same time "silly." All possible meanings of "silly" apply here. The humans are "deserving of pity" because they are "helpless, defenseless, feeble, insignificant"; their lives are "scanty, sorry, meagre" (OED). They do not quite control and cannot quite comprehend their weak, perishable lives. "Solitary" and "silly" are almost interchangeable as a description of the disinherit human self. The castigation in the scilla's words implicates the woman in the disinheritance; the fault is not solely God's. Yet, at the same time, the scilla expect that "you go/where you are sent, like all things," which indicates that even separation is a sending of sorts, and thus the woman should not be held totally responsible. If "we" is what life is meant to be, then "I" would be unnatural, and perhaps miserably lonely. "I" would stand alone against the elements, against the trials and sorrows.
"I" would be forced to speak alone, thus becoming vulnerable in the extreme. The hurt and despair in the "Matins" and "Vespers" follow naturally from the loneliness of the "I" position.

However, the plurality promoted by the scilla is perhaps not exactly what the woman needs. If the plural is, as Glück has written, "soullessness, society, the terrible engulfing human voices . . . . The annihilating, tidal power of the collective voice" (Invitation 150), then the woman would be better off as a lone "I," solitary in her despair to be sure, but still distinct, an individual. In one sense, the poems themselves support the importance of singularity: God is speaking to the one particular woman. Yet if we consider the woman as an archetype of the soul, might that soul not also signify plurality, the outline creating a space for the multitude of individual details brought to it by its readers?

In "Midsummer," God chastises the flowers' desire for first importance. You fight, he says, and why? For "the privilege of being/single in the eyes of heaven?" In one stroke he levels both the idea of the individual's grandeur and that of society's greatness. Flowers and humans are all God's "embodiment, all diversity," not meant to be either supreme or
"continually/strangling each other" as part of the weakness of society. Somewhere between complete disconnectedness and complete annihilating immersion, between the lonely "I" and the social "we," is union with God, a connectedness which promotes the growth of the soul into its potential immensity. However, the woman has yet to reach such a place, struggling, as she is, both toward and away from a re-inheritance to God.

The woman misuses the voice which follows from her (self)-disinheritance, so that her life becomes one of pretense and evasion before God:

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 beds: 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 . . .
Or was the point always
to continue without a sign?

The enjambment at the end of the second line emphasizes that the woman spends her time pretending—pretending to love God, as an earlier "Matins" (#3) says: "Forgive me if I say I love you: the powerful/are always lied to." She pretends not to be "needy," or, as in "Vespers" (#1), pretends that God doesn't exist:
"Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree. . . ./.
. . It was a test: if the tree lived,/it would mean
you existed./By this logic, you do not exist."
Although she has been given a voice, she uses it not
for communication, not for truth in her logic, but for
evasion, checking everything for hidden messages and
symbols. Later we are told by God that she is inept at
reading signs, being unable to "read with any accuracy"
("Sunset"). Even her physical posture becomes an
attempt to hide; though on her knees--an image
reminiscent of prayer and repentance--she is not
weeding (or weeping either, one would assume), not
carrying out her responsibility to care for this
garden. Rather, she is perhaps hiding the fact of her
spiritual delinquency, following her own ideas toward
an end she can never attain--a sign from God.

The problem is not that God refuses to speak or to
give a sign; rather, the woman either misinterprets or
refuses to accept what is given. In "The Clear
Morning" we discover of the woman that "you would never
accept/a voice like mine, indifferent/to the objects
you busily name." God has "submitted to [the woman's]
preferences" by "speaking/through vehicles only,
in/details of earth, as [she] prefer[s]."
Unfortunately, this plan seems to have failed, for the
woman's "soul should have been immense by now,/not what [it] is,/small talking thing" ("Retreating Wind"; italics mine). Happily for the woman, God refuses to give up, making yet one more attempt each time a trial fails, using force when indulgence reaps nothing, attempting to woo and win her by the end of the trial and error cycle.

Glück exhibits unabashed boldness in giving a voice to God. In this she is creator rather than created, for her divine, of necessity, has unmistakably human tones. There is a tension within the God-poems because of attitude shifts toward the woman. At times one feels that God is all-Truth, justified in exiling the woman from his presence, or that the woman chose to disinherit herself. In "Sunset," for instance, he describes his desire for developing a relationship with, and being called upon by, his seemingly dependent creation. However, some poems, in particular "Retreating Light," emphasize God's role in desiring and actively working toward the independence of his creation. Rather than being immutable, the God of these poems seems uncertain, unable to determine how to judge and how to love--knowing in "September Twilight" that he "can erase you/as though you were a draft to be thrown away," that he is the author of the creature and
thus in control, yet apparently unsure of what exactly he wishes to do with his creation. If we look at the poet as god of the poems (as we will do in more depth in Chapter Three), then these tensions fit better—the poet might erase a draft or throw it away. However, on the level of actual God to actual woman, only ambivalence and ambiguity remain: who has caused the disinheritance, whose fault is it, can it be reconciled, which party most wishes for reconciliation, and is God yearning, or really absent, silent, and withdrawn?

"The Red Poppy" is a microcosm of the entire situation—voice, grief, separation, attempt at reconciliation:

The great thing
is not having
a mind. Feelings:
oh, I have those; they
govern me. I have
a lord in heaven
called the sun, and open
for him, showing him
the fire of my own heart, fire
like his presence.
What could such glory be
if not a heart? Oh my brothers and sisters,
were you like me once, long ago,
before you were human? Did you
permit yourselves
to open once, who would never
open again? Because in truth
I am speaking now
the way you do. I speak
because I am shattered.
Immediately, we see two things: speech requires pain (one must be "shattered"), and feelings are ascendant over the mind, at least for flowers (and presumably for humans as well, since many of the prayer poems are emotionally based). What is new is the call for openness. The poppy is shattered because of having opened to the fire of the sun. The concept of openness carries with it the idea of self-disclosure, of vulnerability; it is the opposite of lies, pretense, evasion. The poppy questions whether the humans were once open to the fiery aspects of the ultimate Other (God). Pain, or so the reasoning here goes, is a prerequisite for a voice: you have a voice, therefore you must have known pain. Yet you are not open now; you hide behind the walls you've built. In return for opening oneself to the fire of God in all his Truth/thought/language, one is given a voice with which to express the pain of this shattering encounter between the human and the divine.

The problem is that the humans no longer open; they nurse their grief in hiding, attempting reconciliation based solely on negative feelings (fault-finding, despair, anger) rather than on honesty and thought. Not all emotion furthers reconciliation. At points in the poems, self-aggrandizement overwhelms the woman's
words. This seems to be an attempt at avoiding self-disclosure while still re-inheriting oneself. In other words, if one can prove that the rupture is not one's own fault, then perhaps a reunification can occur without one's weaknesses being made obvious. In "Love in Moonlight" this baring of the heart/soul is looked upon as negative, a means by which a "man or woman forces his despair/on another person." The woman in her prayers protests to God that "it is useless to us, this silence that promotes belief" ("Matins" #3); "I might as well go on/addressing the birches" ("Matins" #4); "What is my heart to you/that you must break it over and over" ("Matins" #6). In each cited instance she accuses God of negligence and thereby exonerates and exalts herself.

Although emotional response may hinder, it does not automatically do so. The red poppy, which manages to open the glory of its heart to the glory of the sun, its "lord in heaven" or God, is not hindered by its use of emotion and lack of mental processes. It says, "The great thing/is not having/a mind. Feelings:/oh, I have those; they/govern me." Unlike the woman, whose unruly emotions run wild, the poppy is governed by its emotions, and thus can relate to God with what God has given it: feelings. The woman, on the other hand, is
meant to use the mind that was given her. In "April," God chastizes humans for their fretful anger and silence toward one another: "Do you suppose I care/if you speak to one another?/But I mean you to know/I expected better of two creatures/who were given minds." Because human beings have minds, God expects them to think, to use logic, instead of reacting emotionally. Rather than accepting this, the woman hastens to shift all blame from herself. Through anger she can cloud reason and refuse to admit her own guilt.

The Self defined in this way, against the divine Other, does speak, but rather incoherently. Her words filter through the morass of emotion, instead of obeying rules of logic or careful thought. If she feels that God is absent, then he is absent; if she feels he is merely silent, then he is silent; and if she feels close to him, then they are close. She refuses to make any true disclosure, for that would entail more pain and would perhaps lead to the annihilation of the Self which she has bought so dearly through the pain of loneliness and distance. This Self empathizes with the cyclical nature of the seasons. Though perhaps unconsciously, it draws near to the "presences" it feels around it, being warned as it does so that "the garden is not the real world", and
that it should "think twice/before you tell anyone what was said in this field/and by whom" ("Daisies").

These "presences" and the cyclic nature of time are both part of what Bigelow calls the "mythic mind." For someone with a mythic mind, the world comprises "presences" (77); any juxtaposition of events can indicate a cause-effect relationship (for example, since birds return in the spring, they must cause the spring) (77); and "time is biological, cyclic, and seasonal rather than segmented and sequential" (78). To a degree, Glück exemplifies Bigelow's ideas, illustrating, in particular, juxtapositions of events and of presences that have added significance because of the circularity of the book. Yet as we shall discover, she does not wholly endorse the mythic mind. In order to show how she departs from Bigelow, we must first note how she illustrates his ideas.

As I have said earlier, time in The Wild Iris is cyclic--from birth to death, spring to autumn, morning to evening. The woman's emotions also correspond to this recurring pattern as she alternates among anger, despair, haughtiness, and neediness. Glück has chosen to step out of the world of alarm clocks and schedule books and into a world where time is measured by the sprouting of green shoots, the slow unfolding of a
single bud, and the rushing of moonlight through the bare limbs of a tree. The effect is magical, looking unfamiliar yet feeling like home. It is no surprise, then, to discover that the woman is not alone in her garden, though she is the only visible "sentient being." We expect her to be surrounded by "presences," invisible only because we seek familiar, human forms and bypass bud and blade in our search for the speaker. But for this woman, the world is composed only of herself and a silent God; she seems not to hear the flowers as we do, although their speeches echo and inform all she says and does. Nor is it a surprise to discover her constantly searching for a sign, for a revelation of the "cause" behind the events in her life. Signs occur naturally in the mysteriousness of such a world.

But although Bigelow's notion of the "mythic mind" applies to Glück's poetry, Glück does not permit us to dwell solely in the mythic. She includes in the poems references to John and Noah, her actual husband and son. In one poem, John disparages the idea that poems and flowers are interchangeable. He confronts Glück with reality: "If this were not a poem but/an actual garden" then the rose could "resemble/nothing else" ("Song"). Glück reminds us, even in her exploitation
of the mythic, that it is an artificial position from which to view an artificially constructed world. In yet another instance, God himself desires to do away with sign and symbol, to speak directly and in his real voice, to establish real causes—which he does in "Early Darkness" when he explains the cause of the woman's suffering. Glück creates this mythic world, yet counterbalances it with actuality by the juxtaposition of contemporary biographical detail with timeless myth.

In "Heaven and Earth" the woman muses on the balance life requires: "The extremes are easy. Only/the middle is a puzzle." This balance must be between God and woman, and as the title says, heaven and earth. Although she obscures the goal by her posturing and speechifying, the woman desires re-union with God, but without annihilation of her Self. She wants God as a "dear friend" and "dear partner" rather than as a sovereign, all-controlling power. At the same time, however, God, in "Clear Morning," is "prepared to force clarity" on the woman, having been disappointed in his hope that she "would cast [her limitation] aside" and learn to hear his voice. In God's view, what the woman wants is "not belief, but capitulation/to authority, which depends on violence"
("Spring Snow"). The two clearly differ on the matter of how to achieve the required balance. The problem is intensified because, according to the field flowers, the humans "are neither/here nor there, standing in our midst." The woman is neither in heaven nor rooted, as they are, in the earth, not completely of one or the other. She does not act or communicate exclusively in either mode of existence, thus preventing any clearly defined solution. Yet this is not something she knows, but something that she must learn even as she learns to define her Self with, as well as against, God.

If it is pain, as I have said, which gives her a voice, and if it is pain which "marks" her so that God will know her--"as deep blue/marks the wild scilla" ("April")--then to relinquish that pain would be to relinquish the Self, to lose the capacity to speak, and perhaps to lose the ability to be recognized by God. Though the pain results directly from the disinheritance--you suffer "because you required life/separate from me" ("Early Darkness")--the overall consequences of the disinheritance have been positive, so the woman learns that separation is not without its advantages. At the same time, however, the loneliness of her position as "I" provokes a sense of need, a sense that she is incomplete without some sort of
connection with the divine. The difficulty becomes reuniting with God without destroying all sense of Self. God himself appears to realize this, for he says in "Retreating Light" that "You will never know how deeply/it pleases me to see you sitting there/like independent beings"; yet in "Sunset" he says, "My great happiness/is the sound your voice makes/calling to me." On the one hand he wishes the separation to hold, wishes to be free of tending his creation, but on the other hand he desires her dependence, desires that she call upon him. Unfortunately, the two seem incompatible, with the cycle of disinheritance/re-inheritance unavoidably replicating the seasonal cycle of death and birth.

Glück emphasizes a separation between intellect and emotion by threading images of fire and water throughout the poems. From the wild iris who finds that "from the center of my life came/a great fountain, deep blue/shadows on azure seawater" to the scilla's image of "Waves/and over waves, birds singing," from the rain which accompanies the trillium's grief to the humans who "kneel and weep," water is connected with emotion, with deep feeling. In The Inner Story, Helen M. Luke connects Biblical water imagery—and earth imagery as well—with "the passive, nourishing feminine
values, the wisdom and mystery of the depths" (92). She places in opposition to this "the fire and air of the spirit and intellect" (91). The imagery in The Wild Iris follows this traditional pattern as well, making one more connection to the Biblical sources of Glück's mythology. The water images center most strongly around the earth-bound flowers who do indeed possess the "wisdom and mystery of the depths." This is the wisdom about selfhood which they share with the woman; this is the reason they can call her "poor sad god," because she lacks the riches of their wisdom. For the woman, the connection with water is through her tears, through her strong emotion. Although Luke doesn't define this feminine image as encompassing emotion, Glück's reworking of the fire and water imagery separates emotions from intellect even as water is distinguished from fire.

The fire imagery occurs most often in connection with God and his glory. We have already seen the poppy's ordeal under the fire of the presence of the sun--and by extension, God. The trillium also finds the "lights of heaven/faded to make a single thing, a fire/burning through the cool firs." Similar to water (which can destroy as well as revivify), fire, which has its use as light and heat, also possesses
destructive capability. The trillium faces this when it says, "it wasn't possible any longer/to stare at heaven and not be destroyed." If we equate God with sun or with fire, because of his glory and because of his position as creator of life, then staring at heaven equals staring at God and results in the destruction of the one who dares be enthralled in this manner. For the woman, too, God is a "fiery self" ("Vespers" #5), yet for her the destructive aspect of fire fails to overshadow the element of beauty. In "Matins" (#7), "the earth/itself shines, white fire/leaping from the showy mountains," and she wonders if, like humanity, God enjoys the spectacle of this controlled fire. The world itself burns with the presence of God, sharing with the woman--if she would but listen and learn to interpret the signs more correctly--something of his nature, communicating with her in his voice, suggesting the possibility of reconciliation.

"Love in Moonlight" hints at how one may define the Self with rather than against the Other. In this poem, the soul is "filled with fire that is moonlight really, taken/from another source." Here the fire recalls both the sun, which provides the moon's light, and God, whose light the soul reflects, or should reflect. Because of an external source of light, the moon--and
by extension, the soul—is "still that much of a living thing." The soul lives, receives definition and inheritance, as it is filled with fire, with light from another source. As the soul takes on the characteristics of another, it becomes a shape. Yet receiving shape is not without some loss, for the soul is "shape/without detail," is an archetype—an archetype of the Self in relation to God, showing other souls how to make that reunion. Defining the Self with God means reflecting his light, yet the Self still exists in the reflecting process; it is not completely replaced.

In "Retreating Light," we see God authoring the terms for the re-inheritance: "I gave you pens made of reeds/I had gathered myself, afternoons in the dense meadows./I told you, write your own story." On the one hand, God requires independence of his creations; he wishes to see them "sitting there/like independent beings . . . /until the summer morning disappears into writing." However, he continues his little history of humanity:

All you could do was weep.  
You wanted everything told to you  
and nothing thought through yourselves.  
Then I realized you couldn't think  
with any real boldness or passion;  
you hadn't had your own lives yet,
your own tragedies.
So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies.

God resolves the story-writing difficulty by giving "tragedies." The pain of having their own lives provides the humans the opportunity to "write their own story." This is what God desires of them; thus it is the one thing that will enable them to reconnect with Him, though not in the way they might have thought, because they can think nothing through on their own.

Learning to think, to write, to create gives "great excitement, as [God] knew it would,/as it does in the beginning." In following God's mandate to "write your own story," however, the woman also distances herself from him. Instead of self-disclosure and resultant unity, she mires herself in artifice and make-believe, once again failing to get beyond the emotions accompanying the passion and tragedies which provide the material for "her own story." God does not require total independence, and certainly not attempted self-disinheritance. Rather, he desires a balance between independence—which allows him "to attend to other things, in confidence/you have no need of me anymore"—and dependence, calling upon him and seeking his help. It is possible to remain "inherited," connected to and speaking with God, without needing him constantly to
provide signs, proofs of his existence and his interest. Maturing involves trusting the Other to continue to care for one, even when he is temporarily absent, involved with something else, or not still in the middle of a reassurance. Childlike, the woman clings to the hem of God's garment, to anything she can label as sign or symbol, repeatedly asking, "Do you love me?" Alternately, she leaves "signs of feeling/everywhere, flowers/scattered on the dirt path." Her mood swings wildly between the need for reassurance and anger at supposed negligence.

God's mandate of independence does not mean that he discards his creation. In "Sunset" he claims that "my great happiness/is the sound your voice makes/calling to me even in despair; my sorrow/that I cannot answer you/in speech you accept as mine." God desires communication with his creation, yet he desires communication at a higher level than the humans will permit; he wishes to speak in his real voice, rather than through the signs and symbols the woman constantly seeks. He does not wish the fire of his intellect and presence to vaporize the water of her emotions, yet neither does he wish to be drowned by those emotion.

Lest we rest too easy with this reading of the poems, however, Glück does not allow us merely to
equate God with fire; he is also the coldness of truth. The lamium flower chastizes the woman for thinking she lives for truth: "you live for truth and, by extension, love/all that is cold." Truth is like a bright light which clearly illuminates all the hiddenness and evasions associated with self-discrimination. It prevents the woman from managing to come out guilt-free. Because it refuses to pass over things, it is cold and remote; yet, at the same time, it burns away all films and coverings, showing things as they are. If the woman wishes to define her Self with God rather than against him, she will be forced to accept this illumination; and indeed, God is "prepared now to force/clarity upon" her ("Clear Morning"). This clarity will reveal her limitations, the grief caused by her preferences and desires. And it will reveal the neediness at the core of her disinheriting, which she takes such pains to hide.

In the cycle of (self)-disingheriting and re-inheriting, we see something of the balance which informs the relationship between God and woman. God is both cold truth and fiery intellect. Woman is both emotion and mind. Somewhere in the merging of these four qualities, the woman gains a soul and a voice, and begins the process of defining her Self, not as an
extreme, but as part of the middle, part of the conjunction of feeling and thought.
CHAPTER II

Father and Daughter

On a purely human level, the poems of *The Wild Iris* are the cries of a girl-child to her father, to a parent who raised her. "God" translates into human father interacting with human daughter. As we have come to expect, chronological time means little on this level either, and we slip rather easily between the voices of small child and father, and the voices of adult remembrance of this past. The adult woman has not managed completely to throw aside her childhood; though in one sense mature, she is still at times overwhelmed by the past which molded and indelibly stamped who she is today. Her struggle then was to distance herself, to become a distinct self; her struggle today involves reconciling the past and its need for distance with the present and the more connected, relational nature of her interactions with her father. As adults, the two personae partake of a similar nature--both exist in language and in
relationship to others, though in the poems only the relationship of the two really matters.

In her fifth book, *Ararat*, Louise Glück dealt with the disinheritances associated with an entire family. Then the daughter's separation from the father was in one sense physical: he died. But we also learn that father and daughter "didn't know how to connect" ("Terminal Resemblance"), that "the face of love . . ./ is the face turning away" ("Lover of Flowers"). Even when alive, the father distanced himself from his daughter, unwilling—or perhaps unable—to allow any closeness to develop. Yet despite the distance between them, he affected her life profoundly, teaching her "to absorb [the world's] emptiness" ("Snow") as he did, to be silent and emotionless. In *The Wild Iris*, the father-daughter relationship is more mutable; possibilities still exist for reconciliation and change. The relationship carries the ramifications of the woman-to-God level as well as the seasonal cycle, both of which prevent stagnation or settling into only a single, mundane relationship. Although still deeply engaged in autobiography, in the poems of *The Wild Iris*, Glück distances herself even further from the confessionalists than she did in *Ararat*, refusing to lay all the blame for mis-relationship on the father's
shoulders, exemplifying a more subtly mythologized and complex reciprocity. Both parties bear responsibility for the separation; both must engage actively in reconciliation.

On this father-daughter level, a clear distinction between human father and God (divine father) does not always exist, precisely because fatherhood is one manifestation of God's nature and because we read the same poems whether considering God or human father as the Other. As a human, Glück cannot write a perfectly divine God. Of necessity, her God is formed in large measure of human qualities; the extremity to which we take these qualities determines whether God or human father is speaking at any given time. Much of the woman's view of God (as father) is based on her human father; thus, her communications, her prayers, operate on both levels at once. God assumes the nature of parent, assigning chores, for example, much as "Daddy" probably did, or ignoring a request for attention when he is otherwise occupied. God acts and speaks much like a human parent because Glück can write only as a human, and because a daughter's experience with authority stems almost exclusively from her parent. Thus God and human father are not clearly distinct beings, and the interplay and overlap between the two
affects meaning throughout the book, allowing us yet one more entrance as creators into the poems.

For the woman, on the human level, physical birth was the moment of initial separation. Yet despite the fact that she became a separate physical entity, she was not quite a Self distinct from others. In "Retreating Light" we see the father-figure repeatedly telling stories, doing all the thinking, over "all those years of listening." The father's thoughts dictate the daughter's thoughts, and thus her actions and beliefs. I do not mean to conjure up the negative connotations associated with the word "dictate," for later in the same poem, the father rejoices over the child's independence. Rather, the lack of independence on the child's part stems from her own immaturity. The problem here as elsewhere in the poems is circular, for this immaturity results partly from a lack of independence. Even when the child begins to assert her independence, she still requires guidance, for the father must provide the pens, pencil, and paper, from "reeds/[he] had gathered [himself]."

While the child is young, the father makes allowances for her level of immaturity by speaking in ways she can understand and by giving her jobs and responsibilities--reminiscent of one such chore are the
tomato plants of God's "assignment" in "Vespers" (#2). In "Lullaby" we can sense the father's deep concern for the welfare of his child. "Time to rest now," he says. "Listen to my breathing, your own breathing/like the fireflies," providing for the girl an image of the connection that holds them together. He takes time in the silence of twilight to put a small girl to bed, to teach her to love. What he awaits is her maturation into womanhood, her independence, so that he will be free "to attend to other things, in confidence/[she] has no need of [him] anymore" ("Retreating Light"). He will not leave her until she is ready to stand on her own, yet he has other business which requires his attention. He desires her to discover the joy of creating and the ability to interrelate appropriately. He wants her soul to become immense, not to stay small and childish.

However, just as God (on our first level of interpretation) lacks consistency, so does the human father. Though his actions manifest care for his daughter, interest in her growth and well-being, his tone at times reveals a subtle resentment, a negativity not evident in God's inconsistency. Behind the guidance, the time, the making of allowances lurks the threat of total disinheritance, undergirded by
bitterness. The roots of this bitterness run deep, into the past, back to the moment of birth and beyond: "You wanted to be born; I let you be born./When has my grief ever gotten/in the way of your pleasure?" ("End of Winter"). Irrationally, the father blames the daughter for even the initial separation of birth, appearing in the same breath to chastise her both for the independence he has received and for the "curtailment" of his independence due to her existence. Having a child provided opportunity for creating--"You were/my embodiment, all diversity" ("Midsummer")--for giving life, for molding another in his image (though he does not succeed). Unfortunately, after the child's birth, her dependence weighed heavily on him: "You are/distractions, finally/mere curtailment; you are/too little like me in the end/to please me" ("End of Summer"). Ironically, as we shall see, his daughter is more like than unlike him. But he focuses on the immaturities she displays rather than on the appropriate independence she attempts to achieve.

In the father's bitterness over the daughter's maturation, in his inconsistency about the appropriate level of connectedness, he extends the negativity by threatening total disinheriance should the daughter persist in her attempts to separate from him: you were
"never thinking/this would cost you anything./never imagining the sound of my voice/as anything but part of you-/you won't hear it in the other world" ("End of Winter"). He hastens to warn her that separation will cost, that independence carries a high price. He assumes a failure on the daughter's part to realize the full impact of losing the father's voice and presence. In the "other world," the outer world, communication lines disintegrate. Away from the father's protection and control, all sound becomes a reminder of the absence and distance, echoing an eternal good-bye. Disinheritance is final and irreversible. Rather than supporting his daughter's individuation, the father hinders her natural development into a distinct Self, allowing his own preferences and confusions to dictate his actions, attempting complete control in place of support for the inevitable struggles of maturation.

The father's control over the daughter's life extends at times to her interactions with outsiders, which complicates an already complex situation. The daughter's maturation process necessitates interaction with others--in particular, a brother is mentioned, though the poems imply the presence of others. But the girl's relationship with her brother goes against the father--both against the expected, societal norms for
such a relationship and against the primary, and thus far exclusive, connection with the father, by permitting a third party entrance into the picture. "I remember," the adult woman says, "lying in a field, touching my brother's body" ("Vespers" #6). The poem suggests incestuous contact, the breaking of a social taboo. But also, this intimacy with a brother disrupts further the girl's already tenuous emotional closeness to the father, in part because it extends the Self of the woman into the realm of outside relationships, and in part because it engenders guilt. The brother and sister "denied/memory [in order] to console" the father, but denying memory of an event cannot eradicate guilt. Rather, the act of lying adds to the guilt, day by day increasing it, forcing separation from the one to whom the woman had lied—in this case, from her father. She can never look into his eyes honestly as long as the lie stands between them; it is a barrier to openness, but one which extends her independence from him.

In his own way, the father encourages the barrier-building, remaining silent in the face of blame. When he does speak, he tells his daughter that the suffering of punishment was not the result of her physical disobedience but "because [she] required life/separate
from [him]" ("Early Darkness"). His conciseness, while technically correct, fails to heal the relational breach and encourages a continuation of the problem rather than a solution. The daughter rails at him for his taciturnity: "you commonly/contribute your silence" ("Vespers" #5). The disinheritance goes two ways; neither is exempt from blame.

On the daughter's side, much of the individuation struggle depends on the negativity of immature passions: rage, anger, despair, manipulation. In attempting to delineate a place for herself, the daughter struggles both toward and away from the father, affecting others when their interests conflict with her own. Her struggle involves a "vying with one another" ("Midsummer"), a maneuvering for the best position, a position where she can be as individualized as she wishes while still receiving the benefits of childhood connection. In "calling out/some need, some absolute," the woman partakes in the general problem of Selves "strangling each other," of requesting one's own preferences and "needs" so loudly that all else withers unheard beneath the loudest voice. The father's position in all of this is one of disgust with the immaturity displayed by his daughter. When her despair overwhelms her and she cuts herself
off from others, he says he expected "if not/that you would actually care for each other/at least that you would understand/grief is distributed" ("April"), presumably because he taught her (or tried to teach her) to know better, to look at life from an adult perspective. Even if she never manages truly to care for another person she must still realize she is not unique with respect to suffering; hers is no more valid than another's, and will receive no preferential treatment. Rather than teaching her to accept this, however, the father merely chastises her, exacerbating the problem by attributing it to her nature rather than to her immaturity.

Mixed in with all the raw emotion is an element of manipulation. Realizing in "Vespers" (#6) the father's role in the distance perpetuated between herself and her brother, she recalls the whole event, forcing him to listen to it. "Don't turn away now," she repeats, insisting that he listen to the memory which she refuses to deny any longer. She faces the guilt of the event and of the lie, but on her own terms, solely blaming her father for the mess. In this way, she distances herself a bit more from her father, the one who "lays down the law;" she negates the law by making him guilty of profiting from her sorrow. She refuses
to accept his law as her own, thus assuming a selfhood distinct, in at least this one aspect, from his.

All of the daughter's passion flows from her childish attempt to separate herself from her father by becoming like him--by governing, controlling, deciding. To be like him meant, somewhat ironically, to refuse to be part of him. And in this we find "the aesthetic of Glück's verse--or of part of it: the acquiring, by renunciation, of a self. Denying itself the possession of the sacred object, the soul finds identity" (Vendler, *The Music* 249). The sacred object in this case is the father, on both levels, human and divine; the woman renounces her connection with him in order to find her own identity, which in this case looks very similar to his (I will expand this idea for the God-level in Chapter Three). She has at least partially managed to distance herself in order to become an individual, to become a Self. By denying herself continued union with her human father, she necessitates a replacing; the relationship with him cannot just be negated, leaving a vacuum. Rather than filling the gap with another individual, the woman fills it with what she knows best--the nature of fatherhood, or at least part of fatherhood, the part she perceived as negative.
in her distancing effort. As he "controlled" her life by doling out the chores and guilt, so she controls those around her by her lies, evasions, and manipulations. As he "decided her fate" by punishing, so she decides the fate of her garden and of her relationships with other people and with him. By taking over her father's nature, she can do away with the actual father and thus achieve a form of separation from him.

Yet her success is not complete. As an adult looking back, the woman struggles to reconcile all of this past furor with what she now desires and is ready to accept: a relational re-connection with her father which will enable her to keep her individuality intact, while still giving her the benefit of his presence. Now, instead of being Other--jailer and controller--he is "dear friend,/dear trembling partner" ("Wotions" #7), bearing with God the brunt of the daughter's conflicting attitudes and desires. In the same poem, she shares her inner feelings with him, the way the earth stirs her with its great beauty, and she requests mutuality in the relationship, asking some response from him: "what/ surprises you most in what you feel,/earth's radiance or your own delight?" She sees the gulf between them and attempts to bridge it,
perhaps not fully understanding why she does so, unless it is to assuage the guilt of "what [she] thought [he was], distant." Or perhaps having achieved a measure of distance, she no longer has to fight against the absorption of her own Self into another's; she can afford to reach out for connection, secure enough in her own self-awareness to accept and perhaps make use of the offerings of another.

Yet she has not attained a state of complete re-inheritance. With the gold lily, she asks, "Are you not my father, you who raised me?" And even should he turn out really to be her father, he is a "father and master" to both flower and child, and this realization intrudes onto her adult consciousness, causing her to revert to the child's struggle once again. The denial, the lying, the "punishment" which she supposes these caused— all interrupt the attempted reunion: the child in her cannot relinquish the memory or the feelings long enough for the adult woman to forge new ties on a level of equality. The past interrupts and disrupts the present, causing the woman's struggle to take on a cyclical nature: closeness, struggle, distance, struggle, closeness—ad infinitum.

Much as does the woman-to-God speaker, the daughter-to-father speaker vacillates between the
relational modes of disinheri Tance and re-inheritance. Separation and individuation occur normally as children grow and mature. However, this does not mean—or need not mean—complete disinheri Tance, complete breaking of all relational and familial ties. Somewhere between total disinheri Tance (whether self-imposed or not) and complete loss of self lies the realm of inheritance, of balanced, acceptable—dare we say, normal?—relationship, mutually beneficial to both parties. Inheritance involves passing on to the next generation the "wealth" of the family's traditions, memories, attitudes, and actions. Somewhere between infancy and adulthood, the woman speaker has bypassed inheritance in favor of a total disinheri Tance. The Self she creates has gotten stuck in an alternately adversarial and helpless role.

This Self that the woman has formed is indeed actually a "role," a series of masks which she puts on or takes off at will. At times she plays the part of the duti ful daughter: planting her tomatoes, attempting a good return on her father's investment, denying memories in order to console him. At times she wears the mask of reconciliation: "Forgive me" ("Matins" #3); "I am ashamed" ("Matins" #7); I do know where you are ("Vespers" #4). And at times she fights
the way things are and the way things have been: "What is my heart to you/that you must break it over and over" ("Matins" #6); "I doubt you have a heart" ("Vespers" #2). In all of this posturing and self-concealment, we may only piece together shreds of evidence about what the woman's true self is like--tentative, fragile, frightened, and desperately needing her father's acceptance and affection.

The father, too, skirts outright honesty, dancing cautiously around the issues, never providing certainty or absolutes. He is both light that rushes through trees and can't be held ("Vespers" #4) and darkness ("Lullaby") that makes the girl sensitive to the merest glimmer of light: "You are perhaps training me to be/responsive to the slightest brightening ("Vespers" #5). In an overlap with the God-level, his preferred mode of speech is paradoxically, and maddeningly, silence. Unsurprisingly, reconciliation proves difficult with such a plethora of half-truths and evasions, the problems compounded in light of the differences in communication style between father and daughter.

The daughter prefers communication in a concrete fashion. She wishes the father to speak "through vehicles only, in/details of earth" ("Clear Morning"),
rather than through abstractions or the symbolic word; like the white rose, she could say, "I have only/my body for a voice; I can't/disappear into silence." In reality, of course, she possesses a speaking voice (more than just a physical body); yet because of her desire for connection, she is unable merely to fade into silence, and in the face of her father's perceived silence, she feels as if she is incapable of attracting any notice at all, whether from another physical being or from God. Whether she knows it or not, she already possesses her father's attention but is unable to interpret the signs given, even when they are concrete, physical realities like the "tendrils/of blue clematis" ("Clear Morning"). As an adult human being (and as a poet, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three), the woman uses and therefore should understand both concrete (and thus "real" or literal) communication and abstract (or symbolic and figurative) language. The vehicles the daughter prefers fail to remain literal and concrete, for they also act as figures, standing for something other than their physical reality. Either way, she misunderstands. Rather than considering them proof of presence and attention, she attempts to decipher the meaning, investing them with great significance, or she rejects
them in favor of a more definite sign, something perhaps even more abstract. However, she is not gifted at interpretation, and since she ignores the concrete language, the rupture continues. Instead of gaining expertise in one form of language or the other, she half-learns both, uses them at the wrong times and in the wrong ways, and allows the dual knowledge to disrupt her communication with the father.

As the woman matures, we would expect her communication skills (even in the masculine symbolic world) to improve, yet because of the circularity of the poems, any linear progression is difficult to track. The woman oscillates between childhood and adulthood, between disinheretance and re-inheritance, between understanding and misunderstanding, and all is colored by the past struggles which intrude into the present, upsetting the delicate balance in the relationship of Self to Other. Like the woman-to-God level, the daughter-to-father level offers no conclusions, no absolutes. The woman is both child and adult, and not only occupies her own space as adult woman, but also acquires the duties and characteristics of the father-god figure, including his position with regard to language.
CHAPTER III

Poet and Poem-Garden

We can separate language into three areas--speaking, listening, and writing. God and the woman clearly participate in the first two aspects of language, though we may quibble over the extent to which the woman really listens to anyone, including herself. Perhaps less obviously, both participate in writing as well. First, their spoken words are communicated to us, are preserved, in writing. Second, God commands the woman to write her own story, and he himself discusses the possibility of erasing his creation, which implies that he originally "wrote" or authored it. And third, the woman looks for "signs," which suggest the written word, though in the most overt sense she means physical, concrete manifestations of transcendence. However, we find the importance of this emphasis on communication in the conjunction of all of these: the woman speaker is at once woman and

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god of the garden, that is, of the flowers which are really poems, and thus she is poet-god, author and creator of this world of disinheritances. The soul in the poems defines itself as more than just "woman" or "god"; it exists rather, as a merging of these positions.

In "Vespers" (#2) the woman says, "I planted the seeds, I watched the first shoots/like wings tearing the soil," and "I am responsible for these vines." In caring for the vines, in planting and nurturing them, she has become for them a god, a creator and giver of life. The Self of the woman has gained an added dimension. The violets also recognize this godlike aspect of the woman when they call her "dear/suffering master" and "poor sad god." She is at once human and "divine." To the flowers, she is (at times) greater than they, all-powerful. And though she knows the "cruelty" of the power of God in her own life, as god of the garden she makes the flowers her own "victims," as the clover complain:

You should be asking
these questions yourself,
not leaving them
to your victims. You should know
that when you swagger among us
I hear two voices speaking,
one your spirit, one
the acts of your hands.
In one sense, as god, the woman is caring for the flowers—she weeds the beds, waters, plants. In another, she is "taking care of them" as of a problem; they become her victims, subject to her every whim, bearers of the brunt of her emotion, of the despair and anger she feels, silenced by her silence. Just as she fails to understand God's silence, so the white rose demands of her, "Explain my life to me, you who make no sign, though I call out to you in the night." The woman is to the flowers as God has been to her—an absence, or a silent presence, refusing to speak in ways which are understandable.

At the end of the cycle, when the gold lily is dying, it questions its relationship to the woman, starting with "father and master" and ending by asking, "Are you not my father, you who raised me?" On one level, the flower is presumably speaking to God, who actually is the creator and thus "father" of the flowers in the garden and of the woman. But it is the woman who has "raised" the flowers, and the lily questions whether or not that function makes of her a "father." If the woman is a "father," then she must possess and use the so-called masculine thought quality which we discussed in Chapter One; in the garden, perhaps she uses it more than she does emotion. She
assumes the mantle of god, accepting though perhaps not fully understanding the power to decide the fate of another. As god, she may decide to give up on her flowers, her creation, "erasing" them just as God considers obliterating his human creation. We see this in one of Glück's essays, where she writes, "The power to redeem and the power to destroy, whether real or projected, always coexist" (Invitation 150). Glück cannot give her figure of God the power to succor his creation and then deny him the right to dispose of them as he will. Because the woman is gardener-god to her flowers, she controls their destiny in a similar fashion.

As "god," or "creator," the woman is perhaps more "father" than "mother." She does not give birth to the flowers--the earth does that; rather, she plants the seed and then tends the plant when once it has been "born." Again, a complication of meaning occurs, for the flowers of The Wild Iris are not "an actual garden" ("Song") but are poems. Glück in this way also assumes god-like attributes: just as she may erase or change the life she has created at will, so she also gives voices to her creations--in this case, to both flowers and to "God." How is it possible for a mere human to presume to verbalize the divine? Yet Glück makes the
attempt, writing, as it were, her own story, at the behest of a God whom she herself has created. Her poems are at once part of the Self which she is defining (a Self that includes poet and creator as well as woman and human), and Other; moreover, both are at a remove from her because of the control she consciously exercises over them.

As poet-god, Glück partakes in the fire imagery associated with God, moving in the spheres of intellect. And, according to some lines of thought, language itself may be separated, much like thought and emotion, into the masculine and the feminine. In her article on one of Glück's earlier books, Diane S. Bonds focuses on the distinctions between figurative and literal—or androcentric and gynocentric—language. Her argument becomes particularly relevant to Glück's project when she writes, "The hypothetical non-symbolic mother-child language (symbolized by the apples) might be viewed as no language at all—as silence" (68). This description of the mother-child language—from the silence to the use of apples—echoes strongly the speech relationship between Glück's woman speaker and her God. Although the woman perceives God as silent, he says, "I answer constantly" ("Sunset"), and he speaks "through vehicles only, in/details of earth, as
you prefer" ("Clear Morning"), and perhaps not only through flowers but also through apples. God steps out of the figurative and into the literal--into flowers and apples, sunsets and wind--in order to communicate with his woman-child as she prefers.

Glück reverses our expectations in this, however, for these literal flowers are also signs and symbols (figures) of life and humanity, of selfhood, of God's presence and attention. The communication (or the attempt at communication) between God and woman occurs simultaneously in the figurative and the literal. God, though we consider him masculine, does not speak in the figurative and symbolic alone. The woman, though feminine, refuses to remain in the literal, seeking a sign (or figure) which will prove God's existence. Glück does not merely reverse the linguistic roles of the two speakers; she merges the distinct roles into varying combinations. Thus God can speak in vehicles and yet have a voice he will use for clarity which the woman won't accept; similarly, the woman can seek for signs and symbols, while passing over blue clematis and light.

In the destructuring of the language split, a dysfunction has occurred, for the woman is unable to understand or interpret this combined language.
Rightly, she views it as silence, but as the silence of absence rather than of infinite presence. She seeks for signs and symbols, for figures of speech, for what Bonds calls "androcentric myths of language," while at the same time misunderstanding the literal speech (which, as a woman, she should presumably use and understand) because it really is figurative. In fact, she too is part of a larger figurative effort, for the garden is not just a literal garden, but also a metaphor for life; the flowers are—in a time-honored association of poesy and posies—not just literal flowers, but also poems. Even the woman herself is more than a woman; she is also a representative for God. The effect of this instability in types of language is the addition of yet one more layer of circularity to the book, one more reason for the necessity of a balance to hold in exact tension two seemingly opposing ideas, to force them into a working juxtaposition. The place from which Glück as poet writes is neither merely a feminine—literal, emotive—one, nor solely a masculine—figurative, intellectual—one. As poet, as woman, and as god, she stands at the intersection between the two, working in both linguistic modes at once.
As poet-god, Glück has had to deal with disinheritances, much as her daughter speaker has had to. The analogy collapses a bit here, for it is as a poet (and thus as a god) that she has had to self-dsinherit (like a child or created being) from her literary predecessors, the confessionalists. Joan Aleshire, in "Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric," discusses Stephen Yenser's distinction between "gossip" and "gospel," the former comprising only local fact and data, the latter truth in a more-than-immediately-personal sense (49). Aleshire's conclusion, with which I would agree, is that Glück's poetry is lyric (and thus personal in a "gospel" or more universal way) rather than confessional. Because, as we shall see, in The Wild Iris itself Glück disparages confessionalism, it might be instructive to consider the relation between her "definition" and Aleshire's. Aleshire writes:

I see the confessional poem as a plea for special treatment, a poem where the poet's stance is one of particularity apart from common experience. Confession in art, as in life, can be self-serving--an attempt to shift the burden of knowledge from speaker-transgressor to listener. (49)

Thus the confessional poet's "I" names names or "tells on" others as well as the self, and foists his or her
guilt, shame, and extreme emotion onto another, perhaps unwilling, listener.

Glück's poetry works with this difference between personal and confessional on three levels. As a poet, she has written in the first person, yet her "I" is not a particular "I"; it seldom offers names, dates, places. It gives us, instead, the outline of a life and allows us to fill in the details. In *Ararat*, Glück gave us what I will call universal specifics--such particulars as a child on a school bus, a mother waiting by a stroller, a village for which one family left the city behind. Though she gave us no names or actual details of life, each of us has been that child coming home from school, that mother pushing the baby stroller, that family living in the village. Her details in *Ararat* were universal enough for us to participate in writing the poems, to feel the emotions of moments we had lived and to personalize them. But in *The Wild Iris*, the universality goes even beyond this. The "I," despite having a named husband and son, is an archetype of Self in relation to God, working on a deeper level than surface experiences in a garden. The soul in the poems seems specific--it is given shape--but its light and life come from outside itself, as the moon receives light only from the sun, and thus
it lacks individual details, for all souls come from one source. Glück refuses, as Vendler points out, to do all the work for us:

[Her] cryptic narratives invite our participation: we must, according to the case, fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages, invent a scenario from which the speaker can utter her lines, decode the import, 'solve' the allegory . . . . Glück's independent structures, populated by nameless and often ghostly forms engaged in archaic or timeless motions, satisfy without referent . . . . In their obliquity and reserve, they offer an alternative to first-person 'confession' while remaining indisputably personal. (Vendler, *Part of Nature* 311)

Glück pushes the "I" beyond the "self-serving" of the confessionalists, into an area where we can and must become active participants rather than remaining passive, somewhat captive (and quite possibly horrified) listeners.

The second level on which Glück's work illustrates Aleshire's ideas is found both in "Love in Moonlight" and "April." In the first poem the speaker says that "sometimes a man or woman forces his despair/on another person, which is called/baring the heart, alternatively, baring the soul." Here we have a perfect example of what Aleshire asserts about the burden of knowledge. This forcing of one's personal despair on another provides a telling look at
confessional poetry's creation of a forum for self-disclosing despair and guilt. In "April," God chastises the woman for saying, "No one's despair is like my despair." In the garden, God says, there is no room for this, for "producing/the tiresome outward signs," which on one level are the limping, weeding, and refusing to care for oneself physically. But on another level, the "signs" are the act of confessing itself, rather than just the result of despair, for outward appearances and actions are likely to bring questions. Then one may grab the questioner's arm and drown him in one's own guilt, despair, and misery. In the garden of humanity, the world, there should be no place for that. Glück's God is definite on the subject.

But besides these two implied commentaries on confessionalism, Glück adds one more level, a speaker who actually indulges in "confession"--but to the God within the poetry rather than to us outside of it. In "Vespers" (#6), the woman shares her guilt with God, forcing him, in a sense, to listen to her by her repeated "Don't turn away now." The poem is her remembrance of sin, of conscious wrong-doing--not only in "touching [her] brother's body" but also in her denial of memory. Glück allows us to overhear the
confession, which is at once personal, yet sketchy enough to fill in with our own specifics. By having her woman speaker confess within the poetry, by providing a critique of this confession, by being personal in a universally specific way, Glück disinherits herself from confessionalism by reworking its tendencies and tropes.

By writing in this more universal, removed way, Glück invites her readers to fill in what they will. But for a poet who admits herself "partial to most forms of voluntary silence" (Glück, "Whole" 237), Glück makes a surprisingly concerted effort to fill in the silent places with multiple voices. In a sense, she cowers behind her flowers and her created God, and even her own dramatized and distanced voice appears to be an evasion, an attempt at hiding. What is she covering up? "Daisies" gives something of an answer, perhaps: "think twice/before you tell anyone what was said in this field/and by whom." Yes, think twice before you presume to give God an audible voice; think twice before you expect to get away with speaking as a flower. And yet, what Glück does works; we do believe in her flower voices with their commentary on human nature. We feel something of the fierceness of glory in her "God," though the interruptions of the
contemporary lend an air of unorthodoxy to what he says and does. Perhaps because of the multiple layerings with their meanings and half-meanings we can accept this multitude of voices as legitimate. And perhaps, too, our own desire "to be in on things," to know the little secrets that are seldom shared, enables us to accept the credibility of what Glück gives us.

As readers of these poems, we are in a sense merely overhearing, listening in on a conversation, or rather on three monologues which, though aimed at potential listeners, all seem to miss the mark, to slip past the intended listeners with little effect. It is as though we too stood with the speaker on the edge of the field, hearing voices. However, we are not excluded as a result of eavesdropping. For Glück, "to overhear is to experience exclusion" (Invitation 147), but here she has not forced us into the position of outsider. Thus in some sense what we do as readers lacks the connotations of "overhearing" or "eavesdropping," of being on the outside listening in. Rather, we are escorted to the field's edge to become part of the dialogue between woman, God, and flowers; we find ourselves mirrored in the thoughts and emotions spread out before our gaze. We find ourselves edging a bit closer to see what response will be given, not wanting
to miss the drama taking place—the drama of our own existences as souls. These poems are "deliberately designed to force the reader out of a passive role as listener into an active role as participant in the poetic action of creation" (Bigelow 98). So, wanting to know all things, feeling invited to listen and to partake, we accept what we are given, flowers and all.

What we are given is a chance to inhabit the place of a woman who is at once first-woman, child-woman, and god-woman, who is standing like a child hovering in a doorway, watching the others, the ones who go first...

preparing to defeat these weaknesses, to succumb to nothing, the time directly prior to flowering, the epoch of mastery before the appearance of the gift, before possession. ("The Doorway")

She is Eve, who goes first into the realm of disinheritance, learning pain and sorrow but also language and selfhood. She is the child, taking tentative steps away from her father's hand, yet turning back for his smile of approval. She is the poet, creating a world in which to explore these interrelationships, to explore the absolute power of the divine Author's pen.
The diverse voices Glück gives us comment on gardening, parenting, writing, listening, speaking, communicating. They muse upon birth and death, not casually as humans are wont to do—as if by their detachment they might disarm their fear and uncertainty—but with passion and boldness, as part of the "own story" which Glück says is so necessary. Inherent in that story—whether spoken by the woman, told by the flowers, or written by the poet—is the sadness of leave-taking, of separation. In "September Twilight," the last poem where he speaks, God thinks of throwing away the practice draft of humanity "because [he's] finished you, vision/of deepest mourning." And in all relationships, "even here, even at the beginning of love,/your hand leaving his face makes/an image of departure" ("The Garden"). Birth does not signal eternity for humans any more than for the flowers in the garden, who will certainly wither and be reborn; in this way, humanity is as a flower, rather than as a god: their autumn, their end of life will surely arrive. Even speech, or the act of writing and creating, merely using language, provides "only/persistent echoing/in all sound that means good-bye, good-bye." All springs must decay into an autumn. The birth which begins in relationship with God degenerates
into a struggle for total independence; even the reunion with him involves leaving something behind, though that something may be only walls and pretenses.

Although the woman participates in the cycle of seasons, although her life in some ways reflects the circularity of the flower's lives, God warns her that "Your lives are not circular like theirs:/your lives are the bird's flight/which begins and ends in stillness--/which begins and ends" ("Retreating Wind"). While the flowers do provide insight into what it means to have a soul, and while they can define selfhood in some small way, in the end the woman is different and faces a different end. Her life is brief, not repeated; she receives no second chance. Yet her life also soars above the earth into the heavens, into Heaven, toward communion with the fire of God, as theirs cannot. Although her life will end as it began, in stillness, that stillness does not finally confirm the absence of God.

We end, with The Wild Iris, as we began, with autumn and the death-before-birth of the flowers, in this instance the white lilies. But now the period of dormancy does not terrify. Though "all, all/can be lost," in being buried the flower will eventually grow to splendor. And while the lily will be "a soul and
unable/to speak" ("The Wild Iris"), it nevertheless possesses the hope of new life in the spring, of a new voice with which to share its new experience of birth. In reading Glück's poems, we can say with the lily, "this one summer we have entered eternity." We have participated in the endless cycle of birth, death, and re-birth, and have conversed with God and his creation, seen through a human gaze. As Anthony Libby writes, "Only the mystic can find god in this life; only the mystic really searches" (47). Louise Glück, in The Wild Iris, has searched: questioning, declaring, creating, and at length finding a god-figure against whom to define her sense of Self. And she has searched openly, allowing--even inviting--us to take part in defining the Self, in defining our various selves along the way.
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