

Giving Voice to the Imagist's Flower:
From H.D.'s *Sea Garden* to Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*

INTRODUCTION

In Louise Glück's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poetry, *The Wild Iris* (1992), flowers find a voice in the only space where a language for plants could exist—the poet's garden. The titular, first poem immediately places the audience within the universe of talking-flora. The speaker, the wild iris itself, confidently asserts at the moment of its rebirth: "I tell you I could speak again: whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice:" (18-20). Throughout the collection, the speakers shift between other varieties of flora, the gardener that tends to them, and an omnipotent God/poet persona. Relying on this mutability of speaker, Glück constructs rich, inter-poem dialogues in *The Wild Iris*, all of which work through distinctly human issues of suffering and abandonment. Yet even as the poems deal with human emotions, the flora speakers still retain most of their planthood. The witchgrass rejects its extermination from the garden, the clover does not want to die a symbolic token of luck, and the silver lily worries over the onset of winter. In short, their concerns are often plant concerns.

This element of *The Wild Iris*—the fact that plants can be first and foremost plants, even when they are anthropomorphized into speakers—presents an interesting moment in a poetic tradition that has long been interested in flowers for their aesthetic beauty. A poem near the middle of the collection entitled "Song" is spoken by the poet persona—and arguably by Glück herself, as it refers to her husband's name. In "Song," the speaker questions the traditional image of the rose in poetry. The first lines relate a recognizable and often recycled metaphor: "Like a protected heart, / the blood-red / flower of the wild rose begins / to open on the lowest branch," (1-6). Instead of taking this metaphor seriously, Glück attacks the very logic of metaphor when John, the speaker's husband, objects to this comparison. "Song" then breaks the illusion of the

collection, reminds the audience that the world is only a poem, and finishes by recounting John's objection:

if this were not a poem but
 an actual garden, then
 the red rose would be
 required to resemble
 nothing else, neither
 another flower nor
 the shadowy heart, at
 earth level pulsing
 half maroon, half crimson. (15-23)

Although this moment is voiced by a secondary character, it reflects concerns that appear throughout *The Wild Iris* about how poetry commandeers the existence of plants. Glück is aware that in the act of creation, poets require flowers to be things they are not. She has a certain respect for the independent existence of plants that seems unique to her contemporary period or to her personal ethics.

In order to understand Glück's treatment of plant existence as a unique moment in the lineage of 20th century nature poetry, I turn to one of the richest sources of flower imagery from this period: H.D.'s 1916 collection, *Sea Garden*. For a myriad of reasons, *Sea Garden* and *The Wild Iris* are perfect companions—in fact, these collections have many parallel elements. In *Sea Garden*, the speakers of the poems have three primary categories of addressees: flora, mythic people, and the gods of natural forces. In *The Wild Iris*, the speakers of the poems themselves can be divided into three similar types. On a poem to poem basis, Glück's "The Wild Iris" offers voice to the "Fortunate one, / scented and stinging" of H.D.'s "Sea Iris" (53). The poppies that H.D. sees as overflowing with beauty, like "fruit on the sand" or "treasure / spilled," become

beings overflowing with feeling in Glück's "The Red Poppy" ("Sea Poppies" 3, 5-6). Based on these similarities alone, *Sea Garden* and *The Wild Iris* already constitute a hypothetical dialogue that calls to be unraveled. However, their connection goes much deeper than the simple fact that they deal with the same genera of plants. At its core, *The Wild Iris* is a collection which mobilizes Judeo-Christian narratives and prayer (in poems entitled "Matins" and "Vespers") to work through personal trauma and abandonment by God. *Sea Garden*, too, is troubled by questions of divinity. Just as Glück relies on biblical stories, H.D. reimagines Greek mythologies while her speakers search for "a last token that we are not forgotten" ("Prisoners," 10-11). The fact that both Glück and H.D. turn to their respective gardens in order to accomplish these difficult projects is compelling. What does the garden offer poetry, and then, what does poetry do to the garden?

In my comparison of *Sea Garden* and *The Wild Iris*, I will explore the various poetic roles of flowers; they are burdened with narrative responsibility and they nearly single-handedly populate the poems. While these collections are profoundly similar, *Sea Garden* and *The Wild Iris* diverge in the fundamental ways in which they deal with plant life. Even when focused on the same source of inspiration, H.D.'s imagism and Glück's pithy lyricism are at odds as they render flora as either object or as subject. Glück's anti-image rhetoric—which first unfolds when the speaker of "Clear Morning" declares that "I cannot go on / restricting myself to images"—complicates the relationship between these collections even further (21-22).

By analyzing the roles of plants in the works of H.D. and Glück, I argue that *The Wild Iris* should be read as a departure from imagistic representations of nature. When Glück imagines a voice for the subjective experiences of plants, she rejects the mobilization of a simple flower-image and explores a dimension of plant existence that is deeper than aesthetic. A profound

change occurs when the role of flora changes from addressee to speaker: the entire construction of the poetic universe must shift. Thus, the talking-flower upsets a hierarchy which places poets (and all humans) far above the subjects of their poems (specifically, the natural world).

At the same time, I do not wish to claim that Glück's approach to representing flora is uncomplicatedly more respectful of plant existence than H.D.'s approach. After all, the flowers of *The Wild Iris* are still talking in service of a dialogue about human issues. Therefore, the relationship between the imagist approach and Glück's own is rather complicated. The only comparative scholarship on Glück and H.D., Elizabeth Dodd's *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet* (1992), argues that imagist nature poetry is not centered in a human perspective. Dodd claims that "Imagism, with its emphasis on what is observed, on what is outside the self—frequently the natural world—allows a writer to effectively 'surrender' the 'I' in favor of the setting in which the 'I' finds itself" (19). As such, my comparative reading will also look to H.D.'s poetry as evidence that the imagist approach does not necessarily subjugate plants to their image.

Glück's and H.D.'s poetry demonstrate two vastly different approaches to representing the flower, but ultimately, both reveal that there are limits on how close human poets can get to plant existence. This phenomenon is rich for analysis—it helps elucidate the complications of perspective and of speaker-environment relationships in nature poetry. In the hypothetical dialogue between *Sea Garden* and *The Wild Iris*, there is a certain tension that manifests itself between the tendency for anthropocentrism and the desire to access the non-human, external world. The flower—whether addressee, image, or speaker—stands at the fork of these conflicting paths.