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Religion, Reason and Reconciliation in Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris*

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Abstract

In a world where reason is king, what is the role of faith? Louise Gluck does not claim to have an answer, but she does explore the question. *The Wild Iris* gives us a god who is utterly convinced of the singular appeal of faith, countered by a worshipper who finds their rational worldview too reasonable to abandon. Yet over the course of the text, neither is able to demonstrate the singular primacy of their point, both arguments leaving their arguers unsatisfied in one way or another. This paper will explore the debate between the human and divine speakers of *The Wild Iris*, using contemporary understandings of Christianity to define the natures of faith and reason within the text, and will ultimately attempt to explain the significance of this debate's inconclusiveness.

Understandings of god in the Christian context have constantly shifted over the course of history. Biblical canons, which played a crucial role in establishing the nature of god, fluctuated greatly in the first centuries of Christian existence, with differing sects accepting and rejecting alternative books of the New Testament (McDonald 244). Dogmatic disagreement continued through the Great Schisms of Christian history – from the ecclesiastical and theological disputes that split the Catholic and Orthodox churches in 1054, to the more overtly political disputes that led to the birth of Protestantism in 1517. Yet even as authoritative and globally influential political entities did their best to define the terms upon which Christians should worship, religion remained a deeply personal thing. The Abrahamic scriptures depict a god "close to the broken-hearted" who hears "the righteous cry out" (*New International Bible*, Psalm 34:17-18), and many Christian conceptualizations of god have rested upon the idea of direct communication with god via prayer. Different groups of Christians held (and continue to hold) different interpretations over how personal a relationship to god one could have, yet many settled upon a god who was part of a direct relationship with the worshipper.

This understanding of god puts a large amount of power on the individual to define the terms of their relationship with god, and, as an inevitable consequence, means that this relationship will be subject to the shifting social climates and worldviews the worshipper is subject to. Published in 1992, Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris* relays the ideological back-and-forth that occurs between one such worshipper and the figure they worship as god. Interspersed across their debate are comments from a number of flowers, trees, and other forms of plant life: A collective "natural speaker," monitoring the conversation between the two and displaying ideas from both. The discourse between human and god is marked by flagrant gaps in expectations and understandings: Both god and human have unrealistic expectations of how their relationship

should function, and as such, neither is able to find satisfaction in that relationship. Both conceptualize themselves as the sole victim in the ongoing dispute between them, with the main rift between them centering around the role of death: Our human speaker clamors to understand death's purpose, while our irritated god laments that he cannot offer anything approaching justification. Their arguments are symptomatic of a deeper conflict between them, one which transcends the specific issues they debate, and defines more completely the irresolvable struggle at the heart of *The Wild Iris*. Our human speaker demands reason from god – explanation for his actions, rational justification for how the world functions – while god demands the opposite from our human speaker, asking them only for obedience, blind faith, and an end to their incessant questioning of the divine's choices. Having structured a worldview based first and foremost upon rationalism, our human speaker's relationship with their inherently irrational god is first strained and then destroyed. Religion, Gluck tells us, has become incompatible with modern human demands for reason; *The Wild Iris*, then, serves as a microcosm of this process, illustrating the increasing irrelevance of god and religion in a world where rational thought has only grown continuously more important.

In order for Gluck to challenge and subvert our understanding of the societal role of god, she must first define the terms upon which her god operates. She does this in a way which codes the god of *The Wild Iris* as a figure analogous to the Christian god. This characterization is present from the text's outset, with the human speaker's first poem addressed to god, "Matins (247)," making several allusions to the Christian theological canon. The speaker acknowledges that humanity was once "exiled from heaven" (Gluck 247), establishing that their system of belief conforms at least somewhat to the Christian eschatology. They also allude to the Garden of Eden, and mark god as the creator of the world: "you made/a replica" they tell their divine

figure, a being which they address in the poem's opening line as "father" (Gluck 247). Gluck's language directly mimics the Biblical presentation of "God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live" (1 Corinthians 8:6). We can also note the patterns in which Gluck titles her poems as further attempts at coding her text's theology as Christian. Our human speaker's poems are almost exclusively given two titles: Those in the first half are called "Matins," while those in the second half are called "Vespers." Matins, per *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, are "an early morning worship service, the first of the canonical hours" (Armentrout and Slocum 324); vespers are "the early evening office of prayer" (539). Our human speaker, then, is not simply engaging in conversation throughout *The Wild Iris*, but is consciously and intentionally engaging in a form of Christian prayer. Thus, in conceptualizing the theology of *The Wild Iris*, Gluck implies that our most important frame of reference will be Christianity. In conceptualizing its god, then, the Christian God will serve as the foundation upon which we read the god of the text.

Once it is clearly delineated that we will be working from a Christian understanding of the nature of god, *The Wild Iris* establishes some significant differences between the human speaker's relationship with god and the relationship which Christianity assumes we will foster with god, and vice versa. Somewhere along the way, there has been a rift: Our speaker is clearly familiar with Christian themes and Biblical canon, yet their lived experience of religion – in particular, the way they view their god – differs significantly from what Christianity dictates it ought to be. These differences define the conflict between our human speaker and their god, and the inability of either party to resolve this conflict ultimately results in the relationship between the two collapsing entirely. First, we must identify what exactly these differences are: How is our

speaker's conceptualization of god nontraditional, and what about their conceptualization so greatly compromises their ability to have faith in a deity whom they clearly believe exists?

One major difference between our human speaker's understanding of religion and traditional Christian religious dogma is the great issue they take with god's incomprehensibility. Whereas Christian doctrine asserts God reveals only certain information to humanity (Johnson 5), our speaker seems perturbed by this, and demands clarification from their deity. "I cannot love/what I can't conceive, and you disclose/virtually nothing," they lament in "Matins (255)." They further question whether god is "always the same thing in the same place," or whether he is more inconsistent and unpredictable in his intentions, likening god alternatively to the hawthorn tree and the foxglove. We can note, in their attempts to compare the nature of god to plant life, their desire to synonymize god with something tangible that they are familiar with. This urge is again symptomatic of their distaste of ambiguity: God, our speaker claims, must be defined, reasonably and solidly, in order to be understood. This poem marks the first point in the text where our human speaker expresses explicit doubt in god, and we can note that they initially attempt to reconcile their uncertainty through communication. In addressing god, they assume they will receive answers to their questions. Part of why they never do is because god never directly answers their questions in the way they expect him to – he instead spends the text claiming those answers should already be obvious, alluding to some greater lesson to be learned.

Author Grace Perry discusses the methods through which god communicates throughout *The Wild Iris*. Writing of "Matins (255)," Perry points out that "the signs the divine speaker thinks are so clear appear opaque and divisive to the human speaker" (Perry 229). Perry observes something our human speaker never does: She claims that the divine speaker genuinely thinks he is communicating well, yet our human speaker never gives credence to this possibility. Instead of

attempting to redefine their understanding of god to reconcile their failure to interpret what are supposedly divine signs, they simply reject god's attempts at communication altogether. Our human's frustration with god, we can observe, is rooted primarily in what they perceive as god's refusal to communicate – while they acknowledge that god sends signs through nature, they are unable to decipher those signs in any meaningful, satisfying way. Thus, this functional silence on the part of god is, per our speaker, intentional – an omnipotent god, as we would expect from the Christian tradition, surely has the ability to communicate in a way that humanity can comprehend, yet chooses not to.

This observation highlights the primary misunderstanding which exists between god and humanity from the outset of *The Wild Iris*. God's first speaking part comes in "Clear Morning," the collection's seventh poem, and his opening line directly addresses the issue of communication with mankind. "I've watched you long enough," god begins; "I can speak to you any way I like" (Gluck 251). Beginning like this implies that frustration exists on god's part also – there is an impatience, which has bred a sort of passive aggression that seeps through as god speaks. Continuing, god indicates that he has been communicating in a way which he assumes has been favorable to humanity: That he has been "submitt[ing] to your preferences" and "speaking in vehicles only, in details of earth, as you prefer" (Gluck 251). God tells us here that he has been attempting to cater to what he sees as humanity's needs: His actions are rooted in a belief that he is communicating in a way that people will understand. God further remarks that humanity "would never accept a voice like mine, indifferent to the objects [people] busily name" – that is, he provides justification for not trying to change the way he speaks, and this justification is based upon what turns out to be an unfounded assumption. In short, god hides the voice our human speaker so desperately wants him to use because he assumes he is already

speaking in a way which humanity will understand – and, being god, takes offense at a human attempt to "dispute [his] meaning" (Gluck 252). The collection's human speaker, as a consequence of their understanding of what god is, is convinced that god is consciously refusing to send a clear message.

"Clear Morning" is significant for several reasons. First, it challenges the idea that god is all-knowing through its clear delineation that god does not know what humanity wants – a major rift between the Christian dogma and the theology of *The Wild Iris*. Occurring early in the text, "Clear Morning" quickly dispels our preconceived notions of god as a flawless, understanding figure. Instead, this image is replaced with a complex version of god which both borrows from and subverts conventional Western understandings of what god is. Gluck's god is established as a figure who judges, yet not correctly; who claims authority, yet who does so for his own sake as opposed to the sake of humanity. Her portrayal of god is one which draws him not as a figure of comfort or solace, but as an enigma – as a being who is ever-present yet unknowable, who communicates ideas which are incomprehensible.

This enigmatic portrayal of god is the one which our human speaker fixates upon, and by understanding the implications of this portrayal, we can begin to understand the significance it holds in defining Gluck's idea of religion in this text. To do so, we can turn to the work of theologian David Tracy, who discusses this understanding of god as incomprehensible in his "The Post-Modern Re-Naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden." Tracy writes:

> In sum, this post-modern category of Incomprehensibility refers not only to our human finitude and lack of understanding of God[,] but rather to Incomprehensibility as a positive affirmation of God's very reality […] For the Christian understanding of God,

> this […] form of post-modern thought is the most suggestive one for rethinking the radicality of the Divine Mystery as positive Incomprehensibility. (Tracy 243-244)

In other words, the fact that we do not understand god – that he exists outside of the limits of "human finitude" – serves as part of our motivation to believe in god in the first place: A god we could fully understand, Tracy argues, would not be able to satisfy whatever urge it is that leads us to religion in the first place. In consequence, incomprehensibility becomes a positive trait for a deity to have.

Yet the human speaker of *The Wild Iris* very clearly bucks this assumption: Contrary to what Tracy would claim, god's incomprehensibility is the main source of their frustration, and the main thing disrupting their religiosity. As we read more of the human speaker's laments, we begin to understand that their animosity with god is rooted first and foremost in fear of death – specifically, the inability to escape death, its presence ever-marring their daily life. Several of the human speaker's poems in *The Wild Iris* are not directed specifically at god: Rather, they are internal, personal musings, almost meditative in nature. One of these poems, "The Garden," illustrates this fear of death and the way it impacts our speaker's thought process. Writing of a couple planting a garden together, our speaker melds images of hard work with an inability to escape the fact of mortality:

> even here, even at the beginning of love,
> her hand leaving his face makes
> an image of departure
>
> and they think
> they are free to overlook

this sadness. (Gluck 259)

Our human speaker's verse betrays their exhaustion: They lament their inability to "overlook" the tragedy of death "even at the beginning of love." Their worldview is permeated by the looming threat of death, exacerbated by their inability to find solace in god – something which they desperately seek but are unable to obtain.

We can now understand the role death plays in exacerbating god's irrationality for our human speaker. Life, they claim, is ended needlessly; the living are subjected to constant fear of death, compounded by an unknowable afterlife. God's incomprehensibility itself is not the issue: The issue is what god's enigmatic nature leaves unrevealed, and, in consequence, what our human speaker comes to fear. Fear of death – compounded by a lack of communication – becomes the defining feature of their relationship with god.

William V. Davis discusses what he calls the "apocalyptic yearnings" present in *The Wild Iris*, many of which are rooted in this inescapable sense of uncertainty and ambiguity about death. These "yearnings" represent the unconscious desire of our human speaker to face death, not out of a desire to no longer live, but as a way to absolve the uncertainty that haunts them – as a desire for "the apocalyptic moment between the *not yet* that is to be and the *no longer* that was" (Davis 49). Davis concludes his argument by asserting that *The Wild Iris* details "an apocalypse that has come about—perhaps could only have come about—through imagination" (Davis 55) – that is, its speaker's preoccupation with mortality is, ironically, what provides them the greatest pain. Without their incessant need to rationalize death, our speaker would be much more content – yet this need governs their thoughts and actions in this text, and, when their god refuses to provide them with the answers they desire, undermines their relationship with that god.

This fixation on reason, I would argue, is the primary thing which keeps our human speaker from keeping faith with their deity. Faith quite literally demands unfounded, unsupported trust, and in demanding justification for acts of god, our speaker is quite literally breaking the system. Attempting to conceptualize god as a rational being – or, perhaps more accurately, *demanding* god engage in rational discourse to justify the purpose of death – both raises questions our human speaker cannot answer, and alienates the god who they address.

The human fixation on reason is something which god finds genuinely unsettling, perhaps because he realizes that this "reason" is often inconsistent and self-serving. For his part, god is willing to engage, at least in a limited manner, in an argument on the nature of reason with our worshipper. He recognizes and addresses their distress in "Midsummer," the collection's midpoint, yet he couples this recognition with harsh judgment:

> And you wonder
> why I despair of you, […]
>
> each calling out
> some need, some absolute
>
> and in that name continually
> strangling each other
> in the open field– (Gluck 276)

Here god points out the hypocrisy of humanity demanding reason from him, while continuing to do unreasonable things – in this case, needlessly slaughtering each other for some unspecified need, creating the very death our human speaker so deplores. While god elegantly refutes the notion that reason is the governing factor in human action, he still notably fails to justify the lack

of reason within his own actions. If human arbitrariness inspires such vehement distaste from his own hand, why should his own tendency to act without justification inspire anything less from humanity?

Ostensibly, god does not view himself as one who must justify his actions at all – certainly not to his own creations. Indeed, his attitudes in *The Wild Iris* are governed by an almost parental form of tyranny. Consider "September Twilight," god's final word in *The Wild Iris*:

> I summoned you into existence
> by opening my mouth, by lifting
> my little finger […]
>
> I gathered you together;
> I can erase you
> as though you were a draft to be thrown away (Gluck 301)

God's relationship with humanity is defined by notions of ownership and obligation. Being the creator, god feels he is owed the gratitude of his creations, something which typically manifests in Christianity as the willing obedience of the worshipper. Discussing obedience in Pauline Christianity, Du Toit defines the concept as "the sense of submission to the gospel proclaimed […] that is[,] in the sense of surrender to the power of the gospel" (Du Toit 67). Swiss theologian Karl Barth, in his landmark *Church Dogmatics*, remarks on obedience:

> Christian obedience consists in this ... that by the grace of God there is a relationship of God with man.[…] everything depends on the simplicity of heart which is ready to let the

> grace of God be exclusively […] so that it does not know anything higher or better or more intimate or real […] (Barth 43)

Thus, god's demands for unquestioning submission are not unprecedented: Faith, as we understand it, is predicated upon "surrender" and the refusal to acknowledge anything "more intimate or real" than god.

Our human speaker's demands for god to provide a rationale for his actions, then, violate this compact, and initially it would appear that the way their god treats them is not unreasonable. Yet anger at humanity for destabilizing this divine balance is not god's only motivator to act the way he does – his motives are much more complex. Much as Gluck's worshipper maintains a view of god that diverts from the traditional Christian worship dynamic, so too does Gluck's god hold unconventional views of his creations. The god of *The Wild Iris*, we find, experiences something just about equivalent to human emotion, the result being that his relationship to our speaker is governed as much by this emotion as it is by doctrine.

Though he would most likely take offense to the label, the god of *The Wild Iris* is undeniably quite moody. His demeanor shifts wildly over short spans of text, often without clear cause or reason. Consider god's address in "Sunset," one of the last poems in the collection:

> My great happiness
> is the sound your voice makes
> calling to me even in despair; […]
>
> My tenderness
> should be apparent to you
> in the breeze of the summer evening

and in the words that become
your own response. (Gluck 298)

And contrast it with his demeanor in "September Twilight," his final speaking part, which we looked at earlier:

you come and go; eventually
I forget your names.

You come and go, every one of you
flawed in some way,
in some way compromised: you are worth
one life, no more than that. (Gluck 301)

The combination of these passages reveals a figure caught in deep emotional turmoil. Displaying obvious emotion, god reveals how intense and conflicting his relationship with humanity is. He is capable, he claims, of great tenderness – "the breeze of the summer evening" contrasting with the chill of winter in a display of his divine affection – yet he is also willing and able to be callous and harshly judgmental. Death, from god's justification here, is perhaps not essential: It is simply not worth the effort to mitigate, all earth's inhabitants too flawed, too compromised to be given anything more than one life. With his dry, almost matter-of-fact acknowledgement of the insignificance of the individual, god seems to almost lash out at our human speaker, embracing his role as a source of despair rather than attempt to save his role as a figure of comfort.

God's behavior here and throughout *The Wild Iris* is indicative of one of the core truths of his existence in this text: He *cannot* be a rational figure. God conceptualizes himself

alternatively as parent, as author, as giver, and as creator – all figures which carry an emotional involvement with their work (which, in the case of god, is the function of the world). God is neither an uninvolved curator, nor a monolithic, one-dimensional figure who functions exactly as a logic-based doctrine would dictate he does. He is a figure of spite, of bitterness, of affection, and even of love – but not, to the dismay of our human speaker, of reason.

This, then, is the core conflict of *The Wild Iris*: An irresistible force paradox of sorts, the unstoppable force of human reason colliding with the immovable object of divine will. We can note that this conflict, despite its wide and severe implications for the nature of worship, does not necessitate the collapse of the human/god relationship – compromise, while certainly difficult, is not entirely impossible. Yet this collapse is what Gluck gives us – she sets up the paradox of religion and reason just to watch it crumble, both sides leaving the debate embittered and without an understanding of the other side's motives. Our human's final word in the collection is in "Vespers (297)," a poem where they spend most of their time questioning – even at the end, they fail to come to a solid conclusion that can reconcile their relationship with god. God's final word, as we've discussed, is the despondent, apathetic "September Twilight"; the place god comes to at the end of this text is one of indifference and resignation. There is no closure in the grand dispute of *The Wild Iris*; no side makes a progression of understanding that renders their debate anything other than senseless. Gluck clearly illustrates that the text's conflict has been for naught, but what specifically about the conflict of religion and rationalism does Gluck believe renders them incompatible?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the place we haven't yet looked in this essay – namely, with the third incarnation of the speaker in *The Wild Iris*, the various voices of flowers, trees, and other plants that "mediate" (Gregerson 117) the debate between our human and divine.

This “natural speaker” (as I’ll be referring to these varying speakers collectively) is crucial, as it combines elements of both reason and emotion, yet not in a way which leaves them as forlorn and aching as our human speaker. Ultimately, the text’s natural speaker is able to find contentedness by the collection’s conclusion – or, at the very least, is able to come closer to contentedness than either of the text’s other voices.

This contentedness, we can observe, is not born from ignorance. The natural speaker is just as aware of the nature of mortality as our human speaker is. In “Ipomoea,” for example, it questions:

> What was my crime in another life,
> as in this life my crime
> is sorrow, that I am not to be
> permitted to ascend ever again,
> never in any sense
> permitted to repeat my life,
> wound in the hawthorn (Gluck 290)

This passage is indicative of a few important aspects of the natural speaker as it generally appears across the text. First, there is the awareness of state. The natural speaker is not delusional; it is keenly aware of the limited nature of life, and simultaneously fearful and sorrowful for what follows life. Yet the way it goes about expressing this sorrow illustrates the second important trait of this speaker. Note that god is not the immediate target of our natural speaker’s disdain; that even though our natural speaker finds the limited scale of life to be tragic, even contemptable, it does not automatically lash out at god. There are some instances in the text where god is the subject of our natural speaker’s yearnings (such as in “The Gold Lily” towards

the collection's conclusion), but not to the point of fixation our human speaker displays; the natural speaker never makes itself miserable, never deludes itself in its attempts to discern the nature of god. Much more often, the natural speaker is concerned with the immediacy of its own emotions, fixating upon the tangible – in this case, the hawthorn through which its life is both literally and metaphorically wound. The same sorrow that afflicts our human speaker also affects our natural speaker; the difference is in where the two apply this feeling, the human instinct being to assail god for an explanation, the natural instinct being simply to bow and process the feeling.

This approach to handling emotion is essential to the natural speaker's function in this text: Much of the time, it strikes the middle ground between the human speaker's inability to divorce their experiences from reason and god's fanatical insistence on emotional absolutism. "The Silver Lily" serves as a good example:

> We have come too far together toward the end now
> to fear the end. These nights, I am no longer even certain
> I know what the end means. (Gluck 300)

Neither devoid of emotion nor unable to contain it, the natural speaker exhibits qualities of both the human speaker and the divine speaker. It does so in a way which balances the instincts of both – this passage, for instance, acknowledging the inevitability of death which our human speaker is so forcefully gripped by over the course of the text, yet assuaging its worries through a display of reason not nearly as callous or alienating as our human exhibits. The solace the natural speaker displays is reminiscent of the solace god wishes he could provide to humanity: The flowers, it seems, have gotten the message god was trying to spread all along, their approach to emotion being one which allows space for the suffering that comes with life without allowing

that suffering to be the defining quality of one's existence. In the grand mental schema of *The Wild Iris*, it is the plants which exist at the central, most moderate point. Humanity advocates for a life based on reason; god advocates for one based on emotion. Neither comes away satisfied from their demands. Nature advocates for neither and embraces both; this is the crux of *The Wild Iris*.

What Gluck is telling us, then, is not so much about the primacy of either rationalism or emotion. Rather, it is a lesson in the art of moderation: The balancing of the instincts that lead to the sort of conceptual extremism god and humanity display in this text with the restraint needed to maintain a functional mental state. Giving in completely to emotion, Gluck tells us, is just as pointless as living a life based on pure reason. Yet Gluck is not unrealistic – the fact that our natural speaker very vividly experiences the same emotional turmoil as our human speaker shows that it is not feelinglessness which will solve despair. Rather, the natural speaker is imbued with a temperance and a solace born not of ignorance, but of balance: Emotion and reason acting simultaneously. "The White Lilies," the collection's conclusion and also the final poem of the natural speaker, tells as much. In what appears to be a conversation between two adjacent plants, one comforts the other after it realizes the inevitable state of loss that comes with life:

> Hush, beloved. It doesn't matter to me
> how many summers I live to return:
> this one summer we have entered eternity.
> I felt your two hands
> bury me to release its splendor. (Gluck 303)

This moment – the final words of *The Wild Iris* – displays a satisfaction neither human nor god is able to attain otherwise. It is not separate from the tragedy of death, yet not blindly accepting of death either. Accepting without being enthusiastic, the emotional pain of this moment is tempered by a recognition of the genuine emotional connections life comes with. The natural speaker does not achieve the complete satisfaction that both god and humanity strive for, yet it is ultimately the most content voice in the collection.

It is no coincidence that it is the poem's natural speaker which behaves in this way – that this measured brand of behavior is equated with the text's representative of the natural world. Gluck equates the literal naturalness of her array of floral speakers with the conceptual naturalness of the views these voices express. It is convoluted and wrong to claim that one aspect of the lived experience should triumph over the others, she claims – this is the pitfall of the human and of god, and serves to justify their continued lack of closure despite their intellectual convictions. A natural state, as displayed by our natural speaker, is one in which reason and the emotion upon which faith is based coexist beside each other, neither being given priority. Neither rationalism nor religion alone can provide the internal solace one needs to navigate life; the two must be taken in tandem. Gluck's critiques of both do not imply that both are unviable ways to live, but rather that either on its own is insufficient in its ability to govern one's life. The natural speaker of *The Wild Iris* is exemplary of the need to balance both.

The answer to the question I posed earlier, then – about what Gluck believes renders religion and rationalism incompatible – is that this incompatibility is not contained within the ideas themselves. *The Wild Iris* does not claim that reason and faith must be mutually exclusive to each other: It only observes that they usually are, and writes characters which cling to their ideals as if there is no place for coexistence. We can observe, then, that the grand dispute

between man and deity is not so much about the ideas the opposing sides tout, but about the sides themselves – the actions of man and god define their ideas more than their ideas define their actions. Rather than acknowledge these missteps in behavior, both god and human only perpetuate their disagreement, and the conflict between the two proves itself to be just as unnecessary as it is unproductive.

The Wild Iris, then, is not a critique of the ideas its speakers present – both of these, it acknowledges, have their importance – but rather of how its speakers fail to reconcile the differences between their ideas. It is neither god nor humanity who is to blame for the collapse of their relationship – it is both, and the insistence each holds on the correctness of his particular worldview ensures that their relationship is pushed beyond the point of repair. The thing that renders religion and rationalism incompatible in *The Wild Iris* is the particular way in which its speakers maintain the sole superiority of their respective ideas. Religion cannot meet reason because the parties involved do not want it to.

Poet Ira Sadoff comments on this pattern of behavior, claiming specifically that such behavior in Gluck's work is rooted in narcissism. "For Gluck," he writes, "narcissism is alternately the cause or the consequence of damaged, perspective-distorting relationships with the other" (Sadoff 82). The speakers of *The Wild Iris*, "doomed to serial repetitions of failed attempts at intimacy," become alienated and ultimately disconnected from each other. Gregerson observes that the central dialogue of the text is privy to "the troubling possibility, indeed, the certain knowledge, that its analogies are false or partial" (Gregerson 118) – perhaps aware that they will never be fully vindicated, both sides of *The Wild Iris*'s debate are motivated by fear to attempt to establish the supremacy of their ideas. These self-interested tendencies do not leave room for the compromise Gluck lauds in her natural speaker to take root, and the instinct of both

human and divine is more inclined towards validation in the moment than it is long-term satisfaction.

The dispute between human and divine in *The Wild Iris*, then, is one about correctness – or, more accurately, perceived correctness. Bestowed with the gift of reason, our human speaker is thoroughly convinced that their world's fixation upon the rational is the proper way to live. When confronted with a religion that forgoes such reason in exchange for paternalistic emotional dependency, they balk: There is no reconciling their systemic differences when our human speaker is already thoroughly convinced they are right. God faces the same issue, but with the added complication of his own literal perceived perfection. By illustrating the failure of either side of the debate to compromise – to admit to the flaws in their stances even for their own sake – Gluck asserts that this obstinance is the true tragedy of the modern world. Despite her callous, oftentimes immature and cruel god, Gluck is not opposed to faith – just its expression as an exercise in obedience, as a thing corrupted by ideas of ownership and right which has changed what god can be, and as supposedly the only possible answer to the suffering of the world. And despite the tragically pompous demands of her human speaker, Gluck is not opposed to reason either; just the assertion that it, in the same way, is the only possible answer, that one must be able to rely on reason even when faced with the suffering our human speaker so grandly fails to reconcile. *The Wild Iris* is Louise Gluck's argument against the assumption of a perfect, singular ideal through which to live one's life; the natural thing, which, she illustrates, is the best thing, is to cease the crusade and feel what one needs to feel.

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