



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**“Blooms against the dark”: The Chromatic
Progression of Flowers in Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

Author: Adriana Untila Untila

Supervisor: Dr Laura Gimeno Pahissa

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Grau d’Estudis d’Anglès i de Francès

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Abstract

Louise Glück, one of the most significant American poets of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, published *The Wild Iris* in 1992, a highly regarded collection of poems that was later awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Inspired by her own garden in Vermont, Glück sets the landscape of a living garden for the collection to flourish. Using a tripartite voice system, the poet explores the triangular tension between the Divine, the Gardener and Nature. Their intense dialogue, charged with reproaches and silences, shapes the collection and divides it into two parts: Matins and Vespers.

The critical tendency has been to study the collection with the focus on the Gardener-God dialogue (Davis 2002, Gregerson 2001) putting less focus on the botanical part. This paper aims to offer a new perspective on *The Wild Iris*. With the focus on flowers, this dissertation will explore how the chromatic progression from the first to the last bloom structures the collection in a cyclical journey that echoes the human speaker's own personal development. To achieve that, this paper will analyze a selection of poems to examine the flowers there mentioned, their secret symbology and meaning as well as their botanical particularities that indirectly impact the understanding of the poems. In addition, this paper will study the balance of the three forces in each chromatic phase as well as how they intertwine themselves throughout the whole collection, meditating on themes such as mortality, loss, rebirth and spiritual alienation.

Keywords: Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris*, triangular tension, flowers, chromatic progression

Résumé du travail

Louise Glück fut une poète américaine qui a publié, en 1992, son sixième recueil de poèmes intitulé *The Wild Iris* (L'iris sauvage). Dans ce recueil, Glück construit une structure dialogique dans laquelle trois voix s'expriment : l'humain, parfois appelé Jardinier¹ ou poète, essaie de communiquer avec le Divin qui reste en silence. L'humain s'adresse à Dieu, qui se substitue à la figure paternelle, avec l'espoir de transcender son corps mais Dieu est absent. Ce dialogue intense se déroule dans l'espace d'un jardin où les fleurs ont elles aussi une voix.

Dans la critique existante de *The Wild Iris*, dans laquelle Morris, Gregerson ou Davis se concentrent sur le dialogue humain-divin et Hardy aborde superficiellement le symbolisme générique des fleurs, il existe une lacune. Les fleurs ne sont pas les protagonistes de ces critiques même si elles font également partie de la tension triangulaire entre le Jardinier, le Divin et la Nature. Pour cette raison, ce travail propose de recentrer l'analyse sur les fleurs, en examinant leur symbolisme, leurs caractéristiques botaniques et leur progression chromatique comme principe structurant du recueil.

Les objectifs principaux de ce travail sont, premièrement, mettre en évidence la progression chromatique des fleurs comme fil conducteur du recueil. Deuxièmement, ce travail envisage de lier cette progression des couleurs au parcours émotionnel du Jardinier, en analysant comment chaque phase chromatique correspond à une étape du développement affectif du locuteur humain. Afin d'atteindre ces objectifs, la méthodologie suivie a reposé sur une lecture minutieuse de la totalité du recueil, en analysant les vers, les thèmes, les fleurs et leurs couleurs. En raison de contraintes

¹ Tout au long du travail, la référence au Jardinier est faite avec des pronoms neutres étant donné que Glück ne lui assigne aucun genre fixe. Néanmoins, l'emploi du masculin générique est une contrainte du français mais cela ne signifie pas une assignation de genre au locuteur humain.

d'espace, une sélection de dix poèmes a été établie, à savoir : "The Wild Iris", "Lamium", "Violets", "Song", "The Red Poppy", "Vespers" [More than you love me], "Vespers" [You thought we didn't know], "The White Rose", "Vespers" [Your voice is gone now] et "The White Lilies". Les fleurs dans ces dix poèmes ont été symboliquement (Chevalier, Dietz) et botaniquement (Brickell) analysées pour comprendre leurs significations cachées et leur contribution à l'interprétation des poèmes.

La progression chromatique de *The Wild Iris* s'organise en quatre phases : violet, rouge, couleurs mixtes et blanc. La première étape se caractérise par les fleurs violettes, dont l'iris ("The Wild Iris"), le lamier ("Lamium") et les violettes ("Violets") en font partie. Cette couleur est marquée par le symbolisme du demi-deuil, la transformation et la renaissance, étant donné que le violet fut la couleur des robes du Christ au moment où il est réincarné. L'iris sauvage s'exprime depuis sa résurrection, annonçant ainsi les thèmes centraux du recueil : la mort, la souffrance, la renaissance, la conscience et la divinité. Les caractéristiques botaniques de l'iris, une fleur bulbeuse qui pousse dans un sol humide, créent ainsi un paysage émotionnel qui reflète les sentiments initiaux du Jardinier. De la même façon, "Lamium" fonctionne comme un miroir de son état personnel, où la fleur parle avec une franchise désarmante. Elle présente son existence marginale dans le jardin en utilisant sa couleur violette pour mieux se cacher dans les ombres. Cependant, "Violets" est un poème qui possède une ambiguïté chromatique qui déstabilise. D'une part, Glück ne précise pas clairement quelle est la couleur de la fleur parlante et, d'autre part, l'existence de ces deux couleurs crée une dualité ambiguë qui va être caractéristique pendant tout le recueil. Le violet, donc, définit une ambiance marginale et souffrante où les fleurs reflètent la quête spirituelle du Jardinier face au silence divin.

Dans la deuxième phase, le rouge, ces sentiments de solitude et d'abandon divin s'intensifient. Les deux fleurs, la rose dans "Song" et le coquelicot dans "The Red Poppy", fonctionnent comme deux pôles opposés. La sombre rose rouge est une métaphore du cœur humain dont la couleur s'approfondit en raison de la souffrance. Cette fleur se trouve cachée sous d'autres roses et se protège de l'extérieur, exactement comme le fait le Jardinier. Néanmoins, le coquelicot n'est pas d'un rouge sombre mais lumineux et intense. Cette fleur s'ouvre et se tourne vers le soleil et le feu de Dieu. De cette manière, il y a un contraste entre la rose qui se ferme sur elle-même et le coquelicot qui s'ouvre vers le divin et c'est, à nouveau, un mélange de pôles opposés. Ainsi, le rouge représente l'ambivalence et l'intensification d'opposés et Glück, en présentant deux fleurs avec deux tonalités de rouge différentes, montre le trouble affectif du Jardinier. D'un côté, il souffre et se ferme sur lui-même pour se protéger mais, d'un autre côté, il veut être comme le coquelicot et se tourner vers Dieu en sachant qu'il y sera accueilli. Les fleurs rouges ne sont pas seulement le miroir des sentiments du Jardinier, elles éprouvent elles-mêmes des émotions, ce qui les rapproche de lui dans cette intensification de la conscience et de la souffrance.

La phase des couleurs mixtes présente une instabilité chromatique qui se traduit par la fragmentation émotionnelle du Jardinier. Les couleurs qui font partie de "Vespers" [More than you love me] sont le bleu et le jaune. Le premier symbolise le ciel, l'éternité et, donc, la divinité ; le second possède une double signification : le jaune doré renvoie à l'immortalité divine, tandis que le jaune terne des champs évoque la mortalité humaine. Dans ce poème, où la voix est celle du locuteur humain, le scénario change : ce n'est plus le jardin contrôlé mais un champ de fleurs sauvages non cultivées. Le Jardinier, conséquemment, se trouve en suspension entre le bleu de l'infini et le jaune du mondain. Il perçoit dans les fleurs sauvages la figure de Dieu ; cette perception, néanmoins,

n'équivaut pas à l'accès. Le locuteur humain étudie la chicorée, l'aster, la renoncule et l'épervière et il commence à comprendre que la souffrance fonctionne comme le mécanisme de la foi et que son tourment est peut-être futile. Si la douleur est un cadeau de Dieu, alors son chagrin pourrait avoir un sens. Cependant, les fleurs semblent ne pas souffrir, ce qui rend la dévotion dolente du Jardinier inutile.

Cette intensification de la conscience continue dans "Vespers" [You thought we didn't know] où le chromatisme s'assombrit. Dans ce poème, le Jardinier n'étudie plus les fleurs depuis une position distanciée ; il est entouré d'elles. Le violet sombre de la pervenche et le bleu profond de la scille provoquent la réminiscence de la douleur et la souffrance de l'enfance. Le Jardinier parle depuis la position d'un enfant qui s'adresse à son père (Dieu) en l'accusant de manipulation et d'avoir provoqué la séparation entre frère et sœur. La pervenche, qui symbolise la mémoire, et la scille, qui représente la fidélité que le Jardinier est en train de perdre, entourent et soutiennent le locuteur humain dans la progressive rupture avec Dieu. Par conséquent, cette phase de couleurs mixtes dévoile l'effondrement de la foi et la crise existentielle du Jardinier livré à la solitude et à la confusion.

La dernière phase est celle du blanc ; une couleur qui symbolise le passage, le cycle complet, la naissance et la mort simultanément. "The White Rose", "Vespers" [Your voice is gone now] et "The White Lilies" forment ensemble la fin du voyage émotionnel du Jardinier et la conclusion de *The Wild Iris*. Premièrement, la rose qui était rouge subit une transformation chromatique dans "The White Rose" et elle est maintenant blanche. Non seulement cela, mais la viorne lantane, l'autre élément naturel du poème, subit également une progression chromatique : ses fleurs blanches se transforment en des fruits rouges qui deviennent noirs à la maturité. Ces changements représentent les idées de transformation et de voyage personnel, qui anticipent directement la condition

émotionnelle du Jardinier. La rose s'adresse à sa figure protectrice de la même manière que l'humain interpelle Dieu. De cette façon, la fleur fait écho à la relation humain-divin et à la future situation du Jardinier : quand la voix divine va finalement disparaître, l'humain va rester seulement avec son corps mortel et l'impossibilité de transcender. Tout cela se confirme dans "Vespers" [Your voice is gone now] où le Jardinier s'adresse pour la dernière fois à Dieu et reconnaît la rupture absolue entre lui et le divin, étant donné que l'humain n'entend plus sa voix. Dans ce poème, les lys blancs se discernent timidement et résistent à la pluie d'automne, ce qui symbolise la résistance et la capacité transformatrice de la souffrance. Ces fleurs dépeignent la résolution que le Jardinier ne peut pas mettre en mots : il est en train d'accepter sa mortalité. Bien qu'ayant perdu la voix de Dieu, la vie ne s'arrête pas de même manière que les lys ne se détruisent pas sous la pluie. Finalement, "The White Lilies" est le poème qui conclut tout le recueil et qui représente la réconciliation finale entre le Jardinier et sa propre mortalité. Le fait que les lys blancs peuvent coexister avec les coquelicots rouges, qui symbolisent la mort, démontre que l'humain a compris que même si son corps est périssable, son âme est immortelle. Le jardin, qui était marqué par la présence de Dieu à travers des fleurs, est maintenant un espace humain partagé étant donné que le Jardinier est accompagné. La voix du poème, qui pourrait être les fleurs ou le Jardinier, s'adresse à une autre figure qui peut être une source de réconfort pour l'humain. "The White Lilies" finit avec une idée triomphante : même si les fleurs sont enterrées, elles survivent non à travers leur corps mais par leurs âmes. Le recueil se termine avec les lys, qui sont des fleurs à bulbe, en attendant de resurgir. De manière cyclique, la fleur bulbeuse qui ouvre le recueil est l'iris.

En conclusion, cette dissertation suggère que la progression chromatique des fleurs sert de principe structurant de *The Wild Iris*. En centrant l'analyse sur les fleurs et leurs caractéristiques chromatiques et botaniques, ce travail propose une nouvelle voie

d'analyse pour ce recueil qui met en valeur la Nature, cette troisième voix dans la tension triangulaire. Les fleurs fluctuent en couleurs de la même manière que l'état émotionnel du Jardinier le fait : les fleurs violettes expriment son aliénation et son sens d'abandon divin, le rouge représente l'intensification de ses émotions et de son trouble intérieur, les couleurs mixtes désignent sa fragmentation émotionnelle à mesure qu'il découvre la manipulation de Dieu. Finalement, le blanc symbolise l'acceptation de sa mortalité et la réconciliation du Jardinier avec la Nature, en dépit de l'absence de Dieu.

Même si ce travail a proposé une nouvelle analyse pour remplir une lacune dans la critique existante, la contrainte d'espace a obligé à étudier seulement dix poèmes des cinquante-quatre du recueil. Pour cette raison, la continuation naturelle de recherche serait d'analyser l'ensemble des poèmes de *The Wild Iris*. Une autre voie d'étude serait d'explorer si la progression chromatique est un thème récurrent dans d'autres œuvres de Glück comme *Meadowlands* (1996) ou *Averno* (2006).

0. Introduction

Flowers have historically functioned as vehicles of symbolic meaning and coded messages, having their golden moment during the Victorian era in Britain. As Dietz explains, “There was a time when secret messages sent by way of a particularly choice in flowers was considered in vogue” (6).

In 1992, almost a century after, Louise Glück published her collection of poems *The Wild Iris*, winning afterwards the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Glück constructs a dialogic structure involving three speakers: the human, often called the Gardener² or poet, suffering from the consciousness of their mortality and their desire to transcend their body. The human speaker appeals to the divine, who is a substitute to the paternal figure and whose absence is significantly decisive. This intense conversation is set in the space of a garden where flowers and plants also have a voice and raise in a chorus that, at the same time, critiques and empathizes with the lyrical subject’s torment.

The three speaking figures— the Gardener, the Divine and Nature —perform a triangular tension that contorts and changes throughout the collection. Although the three of them are of high and equal importance, different studies seem to focus on the dialogue between the human and God, leaving the garden, and therefore the flowers, in a second place. Davis (2002), for instance, argues that the garden serves principally as a backdrop for the human-divine debate, reinforcing this two-voice dynamic as the collection’s structure (47). Similarly, Connelly (2008) constitutes the Gardener’s address to God as the primary interpretative framework (1).

The volume, consisting of 54 poems, could be divided in two parts: Matins and Vespers. Traditionally being canonical rituals, matins and vespers are part of the Anglo-

² Throughout this dissertation, the Gardener is referred to with neutral pronouns, as Glück assigns no fixed gender to the human speaker and imposing one would prevent the interpretive freedom the collection deliberately maintains.

Catholic liturgical practices performed, respectively, at dawn and dusk (Connelly 9). For this reason, several critics have approached the collection through this liturgical framework, as it appears to provide the most evident structural principle of the book. Studies such as Morris (2006) and Gregerson (2001) have offered thorough readings of the Gardener-Divine dialogue, while Hardy (2025) has more recently examined the flowers' general symbolism. However, none of these approaches have proposed the flowers' chromatic progression as a structural principle of *The Wild Iris*, nor have any offered an extensive botanical analysis of the specific species Glück mentions.

The contribution of flowers, nonetheless, extends beyond serving as a backdrop. They not only have a voice, but they also appear to give indirect information—chromatic, symbolic and botanical — that, once acknowledged, makes the comprehension of the poems richer. Hardy states that “The talking flowers contemplate the beauty and transience of the world; they explore spiritual themes and transcendent questions” (106), but this study argues that reading the flowers botanically and chromatically uncloses a dimension of the collection that existing criticism has left unexamined.

This dissertation aims to explore the complex symbolic role of flowers in *The Wild Iris* and to propose a new perspective of analysis. A close reading of the poems reveals a possible chromatic progression in the flowers that appears throughout the book: from purples and blues at the beginning, through red and mixed-color flowers, to white ones toward the end of the collection. This dissertation, therefore, examines the symbolic significance of this chromatic sequence with the analysis of selected poems. It argues that the progression of the flower's colors mirrors the spiritual and personal journey of the Gardener, moving from suffering over mortality toward a form of acceptance and spiritual illumination.

The selected poems: “The Wild Iris”, “Lamium”, “Violets”, “Song” , “The Red Poppy”, “Vespers” [More than you love me], “Vespers” [You thought we didn’t know], “The White Rose”, “Vespers” [Your voice is gone now] and “The White Lilies” were chosen after careful reading and analysis. These poems contain either a flower speaking or one that plays a symbolically and botanically significant role within each chromatic phase. Therefore, the selection was guided by the representation of colors, not canonical prominence.

In order to have visual support on the flowers and easily perceive the chromatic progression, all illustrations in this study were created by the author; firstly, drawn by hand and then virtually painted using the program *Procreate*.

1. Purple: Alienation and Emotional Detachment

The Wild Iris opens in darkness. “The Wild Iris”, “Lamium” and “Violets” all three share a striking botanical reality: they grow between shadows, at the corners of the garden where light does not usually strike and flowers are often overlooked. This is no accident. Glück, by choosing them, sets an emotional landscape marked by alienation and coldness. The purple flowers collectively set up the Gardener’s opening emotional condition; one of solitude, spiritual estrangement and a faith that has not yet found a subject.

Purple, or violet, has been historically a color composed of equal proportions of blue and red. This balance symbolizes temperance and harmony between opposites. However, according to Chevalier, violet is the color of secrecy, concealing within it the invisible mystery of transformation and reincarnation (1069). In Medieval art, Christ is depicted in purple robes once he has fully reincarnated and is in the precise moment of having come from Earth and returning back to heaven. For this reason, violet is tightly connected both with the Divine, reincarnation and death. Nonetheless, the idea of the ‘half-mourning’ “conjuges the notion of death not as a state, but as a phase” (Chevalier 1069). Therefore, violet is a color that symbolizes the end of life and rebirth, making both concepts of life and death coexist altogether.

1.1. “The Wild Iris”: Death and Resurrection

“The Wild Iris” is the first poem of the collection and it is no coincidence that it opens it because this poem holds the general themes of the whole book: death, suffering, rebirth, consciousness and divinity. The flower in this poem plays a huge role in depicting, through its symbolism, the forthcoming relationship between God and humanity and the emotional state of the Gardener, as well as it presents the idea of rebirth and cyclicity of life.

Regarding the botanical features of the flower, the wild iris or *Iris versicolor* “is a robust, rhizomatous³, beardless iris. (...) Branched stem produces 3-5 or more red-purple flowers (...) from early to mid-summer. Prefers partial shade and thrives in moist soil or in shallow water” (Brickell 611). The iris is a flower with a strong underground dormancy that awakens at the beginning of spring and grows between shadows and the coldness of wet land. Therefore, it stands as a resilient flower that has endured many pains by regrowing each time. This botanical reality, a flower that survives underground before forcing itself to emerge back into light, embodies with precision the poem’s central image.

“The Wild Iris” opens with the flower itself speaking, right at the moment of sprouting, “At the end of my suffering / there was a door” (Glück 245) addressing the reader from the other side of what it calls death: “Hear me out: that which you call death / I remember.” (Glück 245). With this, as Connelly explains, “the Iris anticipates the poet’s anxious fixation on mortality” (15).

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

(“The Wild Iris” lines 5-10)

The first half of the poem is about the rebirth of the flower from the “dark earth”. Meaning that there is a journey



Fig.1 The Wild Iris

³ A rhizomatous plant grows from a rhizome: a thick horizontal underground stem that allows buds to develop new roots and shoots for the plant to persist and re-emerge seasonally. (“Rhizomatous”)

from darkness to light happening, one that must be taken each season. The iris has suffered greatly but it still comes back to life stronger than before, since “it is terrible to survive / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth” (Glück 245). Hardy explains that “The Wild Iris” shows “suffering to be a necessarily lonely affair but also potentially transformative” (58).

The poem is a proleptic summary of the collection. “The Wild Iris” represents the concepts that will be addressed in the poems that follow. With key ideas such as “suffering”, “death”, “consciousness”, “soul” and “returns”, this poem indirectly goes over the essential notions of the book. Nevertheless, this summary is not fully understood until, having finished the last poem “The White Lilies”, one reads: ‘I felt your two hands / bury me to release its splendor’(Glück 303) and notices that the buried flowers in the last poem and the reborn flower in the first poem happen all in one cycle. This cyclicity will be later explored as well as how it is in the flowers’ nature to have a cyclical life, but it is not for humans. As Connelly states, “The poet’s fixation is mortality (...) but the knowing Iris, which has endured death, comments on the circularity of both suffering and death with an authority inaccessible to the human speaker” (15).

In relation to the Divine, the symbology of the iris contributes to filling in its absence in the poem. Though not directly mentioned, God’s absent presence can be traced in the poem’s own language: the speaker addresses a “You who do not remember / passage from the other world” (Glück 245), suggesting an addressee who exists beyond mortal experience and who is implicitly the one responsible for the “voice” that “returns from oblivion” (Glück 245). This same absence is reinforced by the flower’s symbolic and historical associations.

The flower itself holds considerable symbology, offering a dual perspective. According to Dietz, “the Iris has been a sacred symbol of divine protection” (116),

making the flower directly related to God and the security over its creations, which offers a hopeful point of view for the rest of the collection. In addition, in the tradition of the Victorian language of flowers, “the Iris, due to their diversity in colors, recalling those of a rainbow, have been titled after the messenger of the gods. This flower being known as the conveyor of pleasant news only.” (Flowers, Their Language 122) Historically, as the Iris has carried the symbolic meaning of “I have a message for you” (Dietz 116), one may conclude that “The Wild Iris” is a poem that opens with a positive message about rebirth, death and God. Nevertheless, the latter is still absent. In the moment of creation or rebirth, the Creator is not in presence, thus hinting at the forthcoming problematic between the Gardener and the Divine: the human speaker aches for God’s support and love but it is not corresponded in the way that the human expects. The flower holds in balance, much like its color, two seemingly opposed perspectives that, in the end, seem to suit the triangular tension in the book.

With regard to color, in the poem both purple and blue are present. The flower’s botanical habitat, wet and cold spaces, is reflected in its color and, in parallel, it mirrors the not yet appearing figure of the Gardener. The flower addresses a “you” and says, “I tell you I could speak again” (Glück 245). Both in words and color, it echoes the initial emotional state of the Gardener, as it is portrayed in the next two “Matins”, which are prayer-like poems where the human speaker tries to communicate with an “Unreachable father” (Glück 247). Sad, emotionally detached and alone, the color of the flower and its natural characteristics betray the emotional state of the human speaker. The iris has suffered, just as the Gardener is suffering, but it tells them: “Then it was over, that which you fear, being / a soul and unable / to speak, ending abruptly” (Glück 245).

The flower sympathizes with humanity and then closes with a powerful natural image immersed in blue, “from the center of my life came / a great fountain” (Glück 245).

It is no coincidence that birds, (“what I took to be / birds darting in low shrubs”) and blue appear in the same poem, as both represent the idea of freedom. Even more, according to Chevalier, blue is the most insubstantial of colors, “the road to infinity on which the real is changed to the imaginary” (102), and the color of the bird of happiness which is always near and yet so out of reach. The poem’s final image: “a great fountain, deep blue / shadows on azure seawater” (Glück 245) moves from the darkness of buried consciousness to an expansive water landscape, suggesting that the emergence from suffering unfolds into the infinite rather than simply returning to earth. The last lines therefore end in a hopeful tone: even after many hardships, life is lived again and suffering is part of the journey.

In short, “The Wild Iris” holds great ambiguity as it offers a general view of the collection but without making the reader be aware of it. It represents the triangular tension among the Divine, the Gardener and Nature but without mentioning it. It depicts God as a protective figure and at the same time as unreachable. It mirrors the emotional detachment of the Gardener while also offering a hopeful insight.

1.2. “Lamium”: Marginal Existence in the Garden

In general terms, “Lamium” is a poem about emotional detachment, the experience of living with a cold heart and the implications such alienation has on one’s perception of truth and love. The speaker, ambiguously understood as the flower, addresses a “you”. This audience could be interpreted as the Gardener or as humanity as a whole. Unlike “The Wild Iris” where the iris spoke from resurrection



Fig.2 Lamium

offering hope to the human, “Lamium” never leaves the shadows but offers instead recognition of a shared alienated condition.

Lamium’s common name is ‘Dead-nettle’ and although it resembles nettles, plants causing severe skin irritation, it comes from the *Lamiaceae* family and does not sting. The flower appears hostile but in reality it is not which resonates with the accusatory but ultimately compassionate tone of the poem. The biological traits of the flower precisely align with the meaning of the poem. Lamium is a “genus of spring- or summer-flowering perennials, most of which are semievergreen, including a number of weeds; some species make useful groundcover. Prefers full or partial shade and moist but well-drained soil.” (Brickell 617). Lamium is therefore considered a weed; a plant close to the ground that never reaches upward. In addition, its hooded shape gives a sense of an individual self-concealed, trying to find solace within itself as it knows the world will not offer it. The flower is confined to darkness as it grows in dry shade under the shadow of large low-branched trees (Brickell 47).

This is how you live when you have a cold heart.
As I do: in shadows, trailing over cool rock,
under the great maple trees.

The sun hardly touches me.
Sometimes I see it in early spring, rising very far away.

(“Lamium” lines 1-5)

The poem’s opening is highly enlightening considering the botanical features of the flower. It describes a plant that spreads under the penumbra of a huge tree: “As I do: in shadows, trailing over cool rock, / under the great maple trees.” (Glück 249). The speaker addresses a “you” in a way to talk about a shared experience or a universal truth. It seeks to be comprehended or not so alone in its despair as it tries to make the addressee understand that “This is how you live when you have a cold heart” (Glück 249). These first lines show a contrast between the coldness of the flower’s emotional landscape

(“cold heart”) and the actual vibrancy of the world (“the sun” and “early spring”). From the beginning of the poem, the detachment and the solitude of the speaker is set. Just with “The sun hardly touches me” (Glück 249) one instantly perceives this distance and disconnection from positive things the speaker has as the outer world appears entirely alien. The flower yearns for warmth as early spring rises “very far away”, almost recalling the wild iris, a flower that has the ability of emerging from the ground.

Nonetheless, lamium does not drown in its own suffering, it finds a way to cope with its reality and quietly accepts its cold existence. When it says, “Living things don’t all require / light in the same degree. Some of us / make our own light” (Glück 249), it is a defiant self-sufficiency that encloses even more the flower in itself and, at the same time, a self-reliance that enables the flower to find its own light amidst emotional darkness.

The color purple contributes differently than in “The Wild Iris”. Chevalier identifies violet as “the colour of appeasement, in which the blaze of red is softened” marking “the transition from the active to the passive” (1069). This symbolic register finds precise expression in “Lamium”, a flower that does not reach upward like the iris but spreads horizontally in a passive way. Hence, the idea of purple in “Lamium” is one of withdrawal and of voluntary self-concealment: a purple flower that blends easily into the darkness, by choice. Lamium’s disengagement is directly linked to the Gardener’s emotional state, the connection this time being much more direct as “you know this already” (Glück 249).

But you know this already.
You and the other who think
you live for truth and, by extension, love
all that is cold.

(“Lamium” lines 14-17)

The flower addresses humanity again with three repetitions of “you”, reinforcing the idea that emotional detachment is not unique to the speaker. There is a strong connection

between nature and the Gardener, almost as if the former echoed the Gardener's emotional background. "Lamium" offers neither consolation nor hope, it just holds up a mirror with the aim of not feeling so alone.

Lastly, the poem closes with a connection between cold- truth and love-warmth. The flower cannot find the love and the compassion it so desperately craves, so it ends by enduring its cold existence and rejecting the companionship of the garden. The flower's acceptance of solitude echoes the Gardener's own condition, as established across the collection's first "Matins" poems, where the human speaker constantly confronts divine silence since "the garden of *The Wild Iris* is dominated by non-responsiveness" (Hadjiyiannis 42).

"Lamium" is a poem about the flower's cold and marginal existence, perfectly mirroring the initial emotional phase of the Gardener. This poem provides a tonal shift from "The Wild Iris". It offers a mirroring effect between humanity and Nature while also defining the triangular tension that includes the Divine, which will find its most direct expression in "Violets". The color has also undergone a subtle change: from active to passive, purple works as a protective color for the flower to slowly disappear into the darkness.

1.3. "Violets": Ambiguity, Cyclicity and Hidden Life

Within this chapter, "Violets" is arguably the most complex and ambiguous poem of all three. The color argument becomes deliberately unstable as the flower, culturally purple, is wrapped in a landscape of white ambiguity.

Viola odorata, commonly known as Garden violet or English violet, is a "semievergreen, spreading, rhizomatous perennial [whose] long stems bear solitary, fragrant, flat-faced, violet or white flower from late winter to early spring." (Brickell 719). Among the many species, *viola odorata* is the most fitting in this poem as the collection

is placed in a garden and the flower's color is particularly relevant in the already mentioned ambiguity. Its botanical characteristics almost resemble those of the wild Iris: a plant that spreads horizontally underground, that comes back each season and stays green when not in blossom. Symbolically strong, violet is a flower that, given the description, also grows between shadows, in solitude. The flower's very name carries the color purple whose symbolic register is one of secrecy and transformation. This suggests that the flower is placed in a solitary or often overlooked spot in the garden, carrying its existence humbly, as violets have been historically associated with modesty and protection. (Dietz 230).

However, the poem opens within a white landscape. Given the title and the associations with it, the flower's color is not straightforward. Glück sets this uncertainty for the purpose of setting the poem's duality and proposing a contradiction not to be resolved but to be analyzed and it is the hawthorn that sustains this ambiguity. "Violets" centers on the dualities one may find in life and argues for the complexity of having opposite aspects that, despite all, find a balance and can actually intertwine.

Because in our world
something is always hidden,
small and white,
small and what you call
pure, we do not grieve
as you grieve, dear
suffering master; you
are no more lost
than we are, under
the hawthorn tree, the hawthorn holding
balanced trays of pearls: what
has brought you among us
who would teach you, though
you kneel and weep,
clasping your great hands,
in all your greatness knowing
nothing of the soul's nature,



Fig.3 Violet

which is never to die: poor sad god,
either you never have one
or you never lose one.

(“Violets”)

Crataegus, known as Hawthorn, is a “deciduous, spreading tree [that] has small dark green leaves and white flowers in late spring early summer.” (Brickell 80) In the poem, its small blossoms (“balanced tray of pearls”) are the other source of whiteness, the possible elements that are always hidden. Not only that, but the hawthorn carries the symbology of duality, contradictions and union of opposites (Dietz 68), which is highly important to understand “Violets”. The ambivalence of the poem is not only found in the tree’s symbolism but also in the language. The repetition of words such as “small/small”, “grieve/grieve”, “hawthorn/hawthorn”, “great/greatness” and “never/never” reveals the symmetric structure of the poem contributing to the idea of two poles slowly merging.

Two positions that come together in “Violets” are the Divine and Nature. Even if the verses are spoken by the flower addressing God, these two elements share one trait that unites them and makes them equal: they both feel. The flowers grieve and God is sad; they are humanized, diminished, comparable in smallness and feelings, and that links them directly to humanity, which is ironically not explicitly present in the poem. As Gregerson observes, “Nowhere in this limpid book does its triangular logic emerge with greater resonance. (...) Between “our world” and “your great hands”, the human may be present, for once, chiefly by omission” (123).

The chromatic argument is also unstable and ambiguous in this poem. The comprehension of how color influences the understanding of “Violets” is of great importance as it is through color that the topics of ambiguity, modesty, rebirth and cyclicity meet. On the one hand, violets in this poem can be white or purple. The speaking flower states being “under the hawthorn tree” which reminds of the position of

“Lamium”, a flower that used its color purple to better hide in the shadows. On the other hand, violets can also be “small and white”, and it is precisely the white violet that is historically “considered by some (...) typical of modesty (...) although some authors adopt it as the representative of innocence.” (Flowers, Their Language 219-221). Therefore, this is not the white of resolution or wisdom, it is the white of hiddenness, of ambiguity held in balance.

Purple, as already mentioned, represents reincarnation, and the end of the poem suggests this: “the soul’s nature / which is never to die” (Glück 263). Nevertheless, Pastoureau and Simonnet observe that the cycle of life begins and ends in white (55; my trans.) suggesting that the ambiguous whiteness in “Violets” alludes to the white flowers closing the collection, which will be thoroughly discussed in the pertinent section. It all becomes a cycle and even the presence of the hawthorn justifies this impression. Trees, elements always in the rise, reaching to the Heavens, appeal to vertical symbolism but also to the cyclical character of cosmic progress in reincarnation and death (Chevalier 1026). Rooted in the earth yet reaching toward the sky, the hawthorn embodies the cyclical movement between life and death that defines the collection’s arc.

To finish, the contribution of color in “Violets” has passed through purple and white, thus indicating a much more complex chromatic progression. Within this chapter, “The Wild Iris” emerged from death, “Lamium” accepted its cold existence and marginality in the garden and, finally, “Violets” have asserted that the soul never dies. The way purple connects all three poems is by the implicit connection made between the flowers and the Gardener’s emotional state. Flowers are reborn but also suffer through this process, but humans cannot transcend; they do not feel the close connection with the Creator and they suffer from it. Flowers, through their color, mirror this initial suffering, uncertainty and alienation, while also implying that their natural cycle is not to be shared

by humanity. Hence, the purple palette marks the initial phase of the Gardener's spiritual journey and, as the collection progresses, the chromaticism will change, always echoing this emotional voyage. Following purple, red flowers will emerge, indicating the developing intensity of emotions.

2. Red: Consciousness and the Intensification of Suffering

Within the chromatic progression, purple stood as a symbol of half-mourning, of secrecy, of transformation and reincarnation. Almost melancholic, purple symbolized the hiddenness of life and the passivity of the not-yet-knowing; the state of suffering for not finding one's place in the world. Now, the hue has moved to red, and this color marks an important shift: the intensification of emotions.

As the Gardener's emotional landscape changes, the color mirrors it. In the previous chapter, the human speaker suffered because of divine absence and the flowers mirrored that suffering with their soft purples. But the red flowers here, the Rose and the Poppy, will not echo the Gardener's state, they will corroborate it. They are witnesses to humanity's suffering and, at the same time, also sufferers of God's intermittent appearance. The human speaker, in "Matins", pleaded God: "Father, / as agent of my solitude, alleviate / at least my guilt" (Glück 268), thus setting the sentimental scenery for intense emotions and a higher spiritual consciousness.

In accordance with Chevalier, red "is the colour of fire and blood and regarded universally as the basic symbol of the life-principle" (792). He distinguishes between bright red and dark red; the former is associated with masculinity, strength, power and vitality; the latter is secret, female, nocturnal and mysterious. Either way, bright or dark, red stands as "the colour of blood, of passion and emotion" (Chevalier 220) and that is directly translated into the flower's color and the Gardener's state of mind.

2.1. “Song”: Metaphor, Realism and the Red of Conflict

In “Song”, with no specified speaker, the represented flower is a wild red rose. In botanical terms, roses, as a genus, “prefer an open, sunny site in fertile, humus-rich, moist but well-drained soil.” (Brickell 170). This poem’s rose is said to grow in a large shrub, therefore *Rosa ‘Alec’s Red’* aligns altogether with the poem’s description as it is a “vigorous, Hybrid Tea bush rose with moderate disease resistance [and] deep cherry-red flowers that are pointed and fully double” (Brickell 181). This description suggests the flower is enclosed, with folded petals directed inwards and thorns that protect it. Moreover, the poem’s rose is one that deviates from the botanical norm as it grows “on the lowest branch”, away from the sun, thus being marked and different than the other roses. This already maps onto the human speaker: exposed, marked by darkness, surviving and protecting what is most vulnerable inside: its heart.

“Song” explicitly establishes the rose as a metaphor for the heart, with the first word being “like” thus setting a comparison, which works as a powerful symbol for the entire poem.

Like a protected heart,
the blood-red
flower of the wild rose begins
to open on the lowest branch,
supported by the netted
mass of a large shrub:

(“Song” lines 1-6)

The opening lines clearly state how this red rose is vulnerable, in a process of growth but in a place of hostility and marginality, as it opens below the higher roses, those that are visible and following the norm. The netted shrub that supports the rose conveys the idea of protection, just as the human heart is both guarded and confined. It is through the symbol of the heart that one can grasp the triangular tension between God, humanity and Nature. Chevalier explains that “in the Christian vocabulary the heart is said to contain

‘the Kingdom of God’ [and it] is the symbol of the presence of the godhead and of our awareness of that presence” (479-480). Nevertheless, the Gardener does not feel that presence because in “Matins”, the previous poem to “Song”, the human speaker asked God: “What is my heart to you / that you must break it over and over” (Glück 268), thus suggesting a clear spiritual rupture within the human. Therefore, when in the poem the rose “blooms against the dark / which is the heart’s constant / backdrop” (Glück 269), this darkness is not just emotional, it is the darkness of divine absence. Suffering and gloominess become a permanent condition rather than a phase, more of an enduring feature in emotional existence and the Gardener is slowly realizing it.

(...) while flowers
higher up have wilted or rotted;
to survive
adversity merely
deepens its color.
(“Song” lines 9-13)

This suffering (“to survive / adversity”) is directly translated into a chromatic transformation (“merely / deepens its color”). The rose dims its own light as a way of survival, hence contrasting with those flowers above whose height has proven to be unsustainable.

Nevertheless, the poem’s self-aware rhythm is abruptly interrupted by a rational, realistic voice that rejects metaphor and poetic symbolism:

But John
objects, he thinks
if this were not a poem but
an actual garden, then
the red rose would be
required to resemble



Fig. 4 Red Rose

nothing else, neither
another flower nor
the shadowy heart

(“Song” lines 13-21)

John’s interruption, he “objects / he thinks” (Glück 269), introduces a competing perspective within the poem itself and, once again, Glück exposes a duality. The speaker believes that while metaphors may distort reality, as they open the poem with a direct comparison between the real rose and the human heart (“Like a protected heart”), metaphors also represent emotional truths: humanity’s suffering serves to strengthen its emotional landscape, not to undermine it, just as the rose deepens its color. On the contrary, there is the other voice that rejects all kinds of metaphor and emotional projection onto the natural world, “if this were not a poem but /an actual garden” (Glück 269). This metaliterary rupture does not compromise the chromatic argument, it enacts it. Just as both perspectives coexist so do bright and dark red.

In the poem’s final image, both life and death are held in balance. With “half maroon / half crimson” (Glück 269), this final verse depicts the reality of the rose, of the Gardener and of life itself. “For such, in fact, is the deep ambivalence of blood-red — when hidden, it is what conditions life: when exposed, it means death” (Chevalier 793). Red in itself holds both dualities and thus the rose also contains this idea of opposition: it survives by suffering and getting stronger, but in the end, it will also rot just like the flowers above. This redness is not like the half-mourning purple, it anticipates death. “Song” does not end with a hopeful blue as in “The Wild Iris”, instead, the red is held in suspension, unresolved. For the Gardener, there is no *si* transcendence here, only endurance, which the flower records both with its symbolism and color.

2.2. “The Red Poppy”: God’s Fire in a Shattered Red

Papaver Rhoeas, known as Common poppy or Flanders poppy, is “a fast-growing, slender, erect annual [that] needs full sun [and] produces rounded, often cup-shaped, double flowers in shades of red.” (Brickell 652). In contrast with the rose from “Song”, the poppy grows towards the sun and not against the dark, already setting a different emotional register. In addition, Flanders poppy botanically commemorates the war because “after WWI the battle-torn holes in the fields of Flanders later filled up with

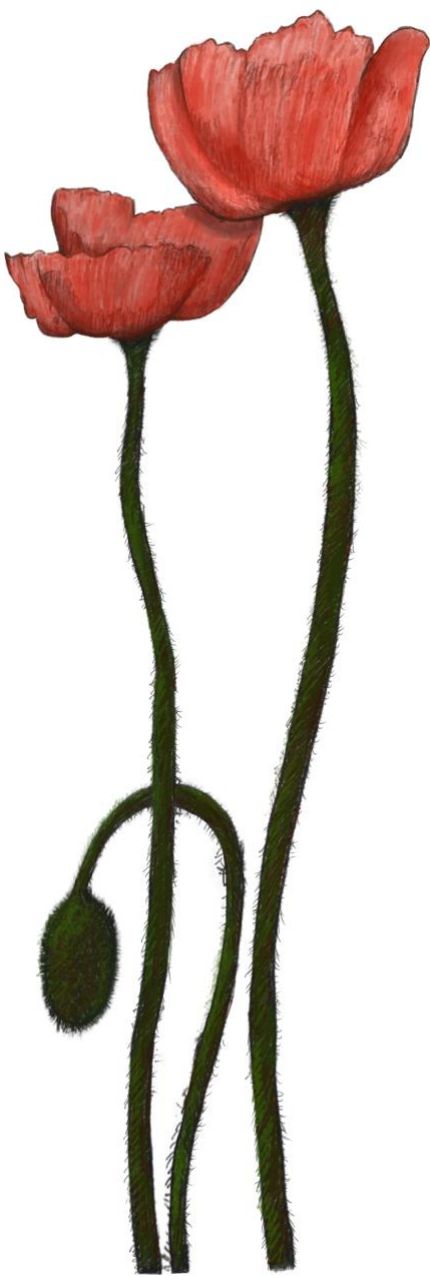


Fig. 5 Red Poppy

Papaver rhoeas. A legend began that the flowers had come from the spilled blood of war.” (Dietz 158). These botanical qualities present the red poppy as a flower self-seeding in destruction, directly connecting it with the Gardener’s increasingly exposed and less protected emotional state.

Unlike the purple flowers and the red rose, the speaking flower in this poem addresses humans as “my brothers and sisters” (Glück 271), marking an important shift in register. The red poppy is not merely a witness now, it describes its life and feelings since the flowers “speak in similar tones but they are still independent entities, with lives and grievances of their own” (Hadjiyiannis 53).

The great thing
is not having
a mind. Feelings:
oh, I have those; they
govern me. (...)
(“The Red Poppy” lines 1-5)

The poppy explicitly claims an interiority, as it has a mind, feelings and emotions: “Feelings: / oh, I have those” (Glück

271). The bloom bears consciousness which translates into suffering, a quality all flowers in *The Wild Iris* have in common (Hadjiyiannis 57).

(...) 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?
(“The Red Poppy” lines 5-12)

As Chevalier states, “the notion of spiritual birth is associated with the symbol of the heart” (482). Therefore, the redness of the heart and the poppy are directly related to divine vitality, as his presence is fire and the flower does feel that presence in its heart. Nature and God in this poem are intertwined in a red imagery of luminosity and vigor. And the acknowledgement of the poppy’s symbolism is crucial because it is through its redness that God’s presence is felt, because in *The Wild Iris*, “God is not presented as an anthropomorphic being as is commonly depicted in the Bible, but rather as the divine power and light of creation” (Hardy 108). The Divine does not have a tangible form since he is light in itself, just as fire is light. Therefore, God can only be perceived through the fire red of the flower. Nevertheless, the Gardener seems to be unable to distinguish God’s presence in the Natural world.

were you like me once, long ago,
before you were human? Did you
permit yourselves
to open once, who would never
open again?
(“The Red Poppy” lines 12-17)

With an almost accusatory nostalgia, the red poppy questions the Gardener’s closeness: “Did you / permit yourselves / to open once, who would never / open again?” (Glück 271). In contrast with “Song”, the rose’s red burned inward, darkening under adversity thus representing the human’s emotional state. But “The Red Poppy” burns toward the

sun and God, since “floral personae direct their speech upward” (Morris 181), symbolizing this openness the human lacks. Even though both flowers bear the same color, their register and direction are completely different.

By the end of the poem, the red poppy adopts human speech as “the flowers sense, or describe sensation, in unabashedly human terms [because] the human writer has no other voice to give them.” (Gregerson 117). It says: “I am speaking now / the way you do. I speak / because I am shattered.” (Glück 271), and it conveys such melancholy that it contrasts with the poem’s red of fire and vitality. Hadjiyiannis states that “suffering is a form of death just as it is evidence that we are alive.” (65), which directly conveys the image of a war field, the blood spilled and the loss. Nevertheless, poppies thrive in this fractured soil and “The Red Poppy” speaks in this exact threshold where destruction and vitality are indistinguishable; where the red color of the blood shed symbolizes all the lost lives and the natural life that persists, though it does not persist easily. Even if the poppy finds God’s presence in its heart, it still suffers. It is “shattered” and thus implying that this suffering does not transform, it ruptures. The Gardener is also broken, as they are trying to find salvation through the Divine, but He does not answer. God only communicates through the voice of natural phenomena, the annual seasons and the day’s cycles (Hardy 108), such as the titles of some of the poems indicate: “Clear Morning”, “Retreating Wind”, “Early Darkness” or “Sunset”, but the Gardener cannot catch its meaning, thereby provoking in them the feeling that God is not present.

In closing, the red flowers have represented their color ambivalence and the conflict within the Gardener. The red rose in “Song” was marked by a dark red and a netted landscape that symbolized its own mode of survival by closing itself and toning down its color. Suffering for the rose meant transforming itself to endure. “The Red Poppy”, on the contrary, with its bright, energetic red performed as a mirror of God’s fire

and presented the Gardener how it copes with its suffering by opening itself to the Divine. This red chapter, coming from the melancholy and passivity of purple, has manifested the intense emotions and the growing consciousness the Gardener is developing. The more they feel God's absence, the more they question whether transcendence the flowers seem to achieve is possible after all. That is the reason why, as the chromatic progression moves on, the flowers will begin to show in different colors, all at once, representing the Gardener's complex emotional state.

3. Mixed Colors: Field Flowers and the Gardener's Doubt

Coming from the burning intensity of red, now the chromatic progression is defined by amalgamation and instability. Unlike the flowers in the previous sections, which had single, defined colors, the flowers in this chapter produce no dominant hue as they are blue, yellow and deep purple simultaneously. This instability is itself the central argument: the Gardener's emotional state is no longer captured by a single color. Therefore, the mixed field flowers with their variety of hues and symbolic registers signal a new phase in the human speaker: not intensification, but fragmentation and the complexity of their emotional state.

In contrast with red and purple, where the garden flowers spoke, the flowers that appear in this chapter do not speak. Analyzing both the third and the sixth "Vespers", one finds that they are field flowers, without cultivation or the Gardener's care, as they describe them as "beasts of the field" (Glück 280). In these evening-prayer poems, that "report the speaker's shift from ascent toward emotional descent" (Morris 218), the human speaker addresses God while contemplating these wild field flowers, but even if they are unable to speak, they still echo the Gardener's disturbed feelings.

The flower's chromatic and botanical attributes hold the gardener's central question: should they pursue transcendence even if "only human life is not circular"

(Connelly 16) or should they accept their mortality? The human speaker is in a spiritual and emotional crisis, as they themselves acknowledge in “Matins”, “Once I believed in you” (Glück 278), and the flowers mirror this emotional turbulence.

3.1. Studying the Field: Blue, Yellow and the Gardener’s Suspended Faith

In “Vespers” [More than you love me] the setting has changed: it is no longer the garden where cultivated flowers grew; here the Gardener is amidst a field of wildflowers that are independent and self-sustaining entities. The speaker opens the poem addressing God with open reproach, “More than you love me, very possibly / you love the beasts of the field, even,

/ possibly, the field itself” (Glück 280), and the Gardener themselves describe four flowers: “in August dotted / with wild chicory and aster” they “study the hawkweed, / the buttercup” (Glück 280).



Fig. 6 Wild Chicory

The four flowers the Gardener names are not decorative detail. Wild chicory

(*Cichorium intybus*), a clump-forming perennial with bright blue flowers that are at their best before noon and fade by afternoon (Brickell 242), introduces a sense of fleeting presence echoing God’s absence throughout the collection. The aster (*Aster alpinus*), purplish-blue with a yellow core (Brickell 367), visually exemplifies this chromatic instability: neither fully yellow nor fully blue, it stands between states much like the Gardener. The hawkweed (*Hieracium*),



Fig.7 Aster

a weed with yellow flowers that thrives in poor soil (Brickell 598) and the buttercup (*Ranunculus constatinopolitanus*), whose sap causes skin irritation (Brickell 275), introduce a significant remark: these are not cultivated flowers but wild ungovernable ones. Their presence confirms that the Gardener is no longer in the ordered space of the garden but in a field that does not answer to human care. The poem itself manifests this: the buttercup is “protected from the grazing herd/ by being poisonous” (Glück 280). The Gardener does not seem necessary for their growth, thus signaling a disconnection between Nature and the Gardener, just as Morris argues: “By perceiving flowers as a gift that conceals a deficiency of real feeling, Glück suggests the speaker’s distance from an immanent perspective on nature” (182). The human speaker reveals that “I have compared myself / to those flowers, their range of feeling / so much smaller and without issue” (Glück 280), indicating this detachment because it is precisely this comparison that has increased the Gardener’s suspicion that, as Morris claims, their “representations of nature are redundant and superfluous, because nature is already a symbolic

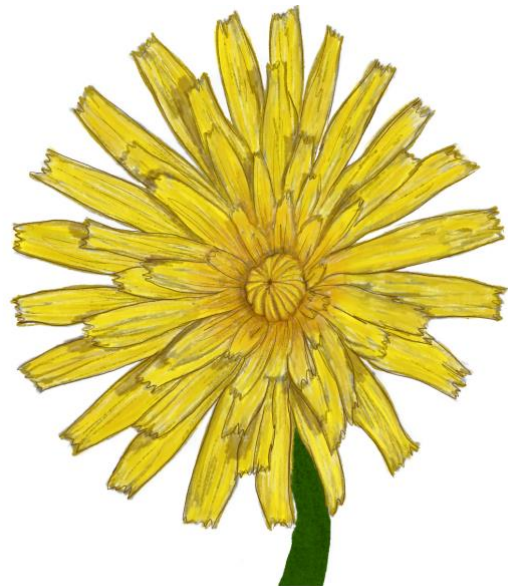


Fig.8 Hawkweed

representation of God’s grandeur” (221). From this position of alienation, the Gardener seems to turn against flowers, even claiming that their feelings are less important and calling them ‘beasts’ since they are in God’s favor: “you have abandoned me / in favor of the field” (Glück 280). Connelly explains that although the Gardener can observe and esteem the flowers, humanity will never belong with them hence they will never accomplish the transcendence the flowers stand for (11).



Fig. 9 Buttercup

The poem's color palette is not unified, as it oscillates from blue to yellow; from transcendence to Earth, leaving the Gardener in a suspension between the two. On the one hand, according to Chevalier, blue brings the idea of eternity to mind and attracts oneself towards the infinite since this color awakens a need for purity and a longing for what is beyond nature (103). The Gardener recognizes God's color in the flowers, through "waves of wild aster and chicory shining / pale blue and deep blue" they see "how like your raiment it is" (Glück 280). Nevertheless, recognition does not equal access. As Connelly argues,

God is perceivable through physical sensation and the natural world (41), yet the Gardener cannot bridge the distance between perception and presence. On the other hand, the yellow from the buttercup, the hawkweed and the aster's centre carries a double meaning. As golden yellow, it is "the vehicle of youth, strength and divine immortality" (Chevalier 1137). But as field yellow, ordinary and overlooked, it pulls toward the ground and mortality. The poem is set "in August" (Glück 280), therefore this yellow of "the ripe crops of Summer, gives advance notice of Autumn, when Earth is stripped bare" (Chevalier 1138). Not only that, but yellow is also a sign of old age and the oncoming death (Chevalier 1138). Therefore, in "Vespers", the pairing of blue and yellow results in a Gardener suspended between the immortality they seek, represented in blue, and the mortality that defines them, symbolized by yellow.

(...) I am uniquely
suited to praise you. Then why
torment me?
(...)
is pain
your gift to make me

conscious in my need of you, as though
I must need you to worship you

(“Vespers” lines 8-10, 12-14)

The chromatic suspension produces not peace but anguish as the Gardener implores God: “why torment me?” (Glück 280). They are slowly realizing that pain is the mechanism of faith to make them “conscious in my need of you [God]” (Glück 280). The human speaker turns to the flowers to find meaning but, as Connelly states, the flowers “do not seek exemption from suffering, but accept it as an aspect of their identities” (60). Consequently, “Vespers” close with an unresolved tension. If pain is God’s gift, then the Gardener’s suffering may appear purposeful. However, as already mentioned, the flowers colorfully embody the divine without conscious anguish, hence the Gardener’s distress appears not meaningful but futile, like “a scapegoat whose pain is unredeemed” (Morris 222). The doubt on the source of misery and hardship is unresolved here. As Hadjiyiannis remarks, “*The Wild Iris* cannot settle on one answer regarding suffering’s existence, choosing instead ambiguity (...) and multiple perspectives that prioritise debate over consensus” (54).

3.2. Deep Blue and Purple: Memory’s Fragmentation

In contrast with the previous “Vespers”, where the Gardener studied the flowers from an alienated position, here the human speaker is surrounded by them. In “Vespers” [You thought we didn’t know], the speaker remembers “embankments / netted with dark vinca” and “bells / of the wild scilla” (Glück 286), making the Gardener immersed in the landscape, not observing it. Regarding the flowers, *Vinca minor*, known as vinca or lesser periwinkle, is a proliferating subshrub that creates large mats of small dark green leaves that bear small blue or purple flowers (Brickell 165). The adjective of “dark” is Glück’s

own, but it is significant as it signals both the shaded habitat, since it “is useful for groundcover in shade” (Brickell 719), and the deeper more troubled color register of the poem. The “bells of the wild scilla” fit the description of *Scilla siberica*, an “early spring-flowering bulb with (...) bell-shaped, deep rich blue flowers” (Brickell 420). In all, these low, hidden flowers define the poem’s cloistered atmosphere and, as Costello explains, “the self of The Wild Iris is contemplative, evoking and in turn refusing the divine within the cloistered world of the garden” (53).



Fig. 10 Dark Vinca

Chromatically, the blue-yellow suspension of the previous “Vespers” has collapsed into a deep blue and purple, because the more the collection progresses, the more one sees “that Eden has collapsed” (Vendler 36). In this “Vespers”, there is no more the pale purple of the initial poems, where suffering was not yet comprehended. The darker colors expose a faith that is under examination and found corrupt.

You thought we didn’t know. But we knew once,
children know these things. Don’t turn away now—we
inhabited
a lie to appease you.

(“Vespers” lines 1-4)

The speaker opens the poem in a position of a child, hence putting God in the position of the father and, immediately after is the poem’s central accusation: “Don’t turn away now—we / inhabited / a lie to appease you” (Glück 286). The verb ‘inhabit’, and the fact it is just this word as a verse, alludes to the complete immersion of the Gardener and their

sibling within God's lie, which echoes the way the flowers surround them. The speaker remembers "lying in a field, touching my brother's body" (Glück 286), which portrays an ambiguous intimate moment between two deeply united siblings. But then, the Gardener accuses again and repeats: "Don't turn away now; we denied / memory to console you" (Glück 286). They comfort the Divine because, under his gaze, they have sinned and, as Morris declares, "the speaker goes so far as to accuse God of emotional blackmail", thus forcing the speaker to remain alone and seek consolation from God who "cast as some kind of cosmic insurance salesman would 'profit' by providing" (224).



Fig. 11 Wild Scilla

These siblings, disciplined for a sin of dubious quality, "mimicked you [God], reciting / the terms of our punishment" (Glück 286). This statement not only frames faith as manipulative instead of devotional but it also depicts God as an authoritarian father. Chevalier claims that the father's role and its figure exercise an influence that renders the child submissive and impotent, discouraging all independence (372), which resonates with the human speaker's shown dependency throughout the book that is now beginning to diminish.

The chromatic consequence of the Gardener's slow revelation is found in the deep blue-purple colors that no longer signify transcendence but a downward movement of what memory reveals. The flowers surround the Gardener and reveal them that their loyalty has been exploited. Furthermore, considering that the speaker "remember[s] / sunlight of early spring" and "flowers / of the wild scilla" (Glück 286), it reminds of the own "Scilla" poem where the flower asked humanity: "Why do you look up? To hear / and echo like the voice / of god?" (Glück

256). This flower has previously critiqued the idea of faith and the blind devotion of the Gardener, and the latter is slowly remembering it.

It is precisely memory that constitutes the mechanism of crisis in the poem since “deceit / begins as forgetting” (Glück 286). On the one hand, the flowers connect to this idea through their symbolism. *Vinca minor* holds the symbolic meaning of memories and early recollections. More significantly, Dietz states, “It is believed that if you gaze upon *Vinca minor* flowers your lost memories will return to you” (229), which completely fits with the poem’s description of recovering memory. Scilla, in turn, symbolizes constancy, fidelity and loyalty (Dietz 200), traits that the Gardener so earnestly claimed in relation to God, but that they are now slowly vanishing. On the other hand, the poem’s language discloses this fragmented memory that is returning. The repetition of “I remember” (Glück 286) at the end of lines four, six, ten and twelve works as an epistrophe and adds weight to the Gardener’s slow realization of their corrupted faith.

The poem closes with two direct accusations:

(...) who else had reason to create
mistrust between a brother and a sister but the one
who profited, to whom we turned in solitude? Who else
would so envy the bond we had then
as to tell us it was not earth
but heaven we were losing?

(“Vespers” lines 15 - 20)

The Gardener holds God responsible for their loneliness as they “turned in solitude” to him (Glück 286). They accuse God of feeling “envy” of the sibling’s bond, so he cast it as a sin and made brother and sister malleable to his desire. As Morris claims, “God’s “lie” was His threat to exclude the speaker from heaven as the cost for a transgression (in this case the physical intimacy between brother and sister)” (224). Consequently, the final question in “Vespers” is God’s manipulation fully unmasked as “it was not earth / but heaven we were losing?” (Glück 286). Here what the Gardener mourns is not the earthly

loss but the possibility of transcendence itself. The faith that was supposed to lead them toward heaven was the very thing that corrupted their capacity to reach it.

To finish, it is worth noting that in the sixth “Vespers” and the following poem “Early Darkness” is where the dialogue between human and God is most visible. In “Early Darkness” God immediately answers, “Your memory is not/ powerful enough, it will not / reach back far enough—” (Glück 287), which directly resonates with the topic of childhood trauma remembered fragmentally in “Vespers”. Then God continues: “You are not suffering because you touched each other / but because you were born, / because you required life / separate from me.” (Glück 287). With this statement, God repositions the source of suffering from the transgression to the existential condition of being human, but this is not absolution, it is a redefinition that makes suffering inescapable. The Divine in this poem responds through natural phenomena and a darkness that anticipates the final rupture between God and humanity as well as the Gardener’s own mortality. This doubt is left unresolved, but the chromatic progression will clarify it.

4. White: Passage and the Reconciliation with Mortality

Within the chromatic progression, white stands as the last unifying color since “it can signify either the absence of colour or the sum of all colours” (Chevalier 1105). Here, white stands as the light at the end of suffering; the quiet acceptance of all the personal stages in one’s journey and therefore all the colors that represent them. This whiteness symbolizes the moment of death, the crossing bridge between what is visible and what is not (Chevalier 1105). Pastoureau and Simonnet explain, “with white, we are placed within the symbols of virginity and innocence, but curiously also of old age and wisdom. (...) As if the cycle of life began with white, went through different colors and finished with white” (54; my trans.). The white flowers of “The White Rose”, “Vespers” and “The White Lilies”, which represent this cyclicity, do not comfort; they witness and by doing

so they make the Gardener's passage possible. These three poems trace a movement from alienation to reconciliation and the flowers mirror this gradual approach toward peace.

4.1. "The White Rose": Light Through Blackness

In contrast with "Song", where the dark red rose grew against darkness, in this poem the white rose is defined by its color. It is not a different flower; it is the same one but at a different point of its personal journey. The flower, revealed only in the title, has undergone a chromatic transformation to white, which is "the colour of 'passage', (...) for those rites through which changes in existence take place" (Chevalier 1105). The other natural element that undergoes a chromatic transformation in its way is "the wayfarer tree" (Glück 289). *Viburnum lantana* is a vast shrub bearing small white flowers followed by red fruits that ripen to black (Brickell 718). The wayfarer's own chromatic sequence, from white to red and black, mirrors the collection's arc in miniature. Not only that, but the tree's name adds meaning to the poem as a 'wayfarer' is a person that goes on a journey. Altogether, "The White Rose" stands for the ideas of transformation and personal journey, which directly anticipate the Gardener's emotional condition.

The poem opens with a sense of estrangement, as the flower utters: "This is the earth? Then / I don't belong here." (Glück 289). This acute alienation echoes the Gardener's sense of alienation throughout the collection and it is understandable as the human comes from a phase of doubt and mixed feelings and still feels as out of this world, just as the flower. However, the rose addresses the Gardener differently this time: it speaks to them the same way the Gardener communicates with God: "Who are you in the

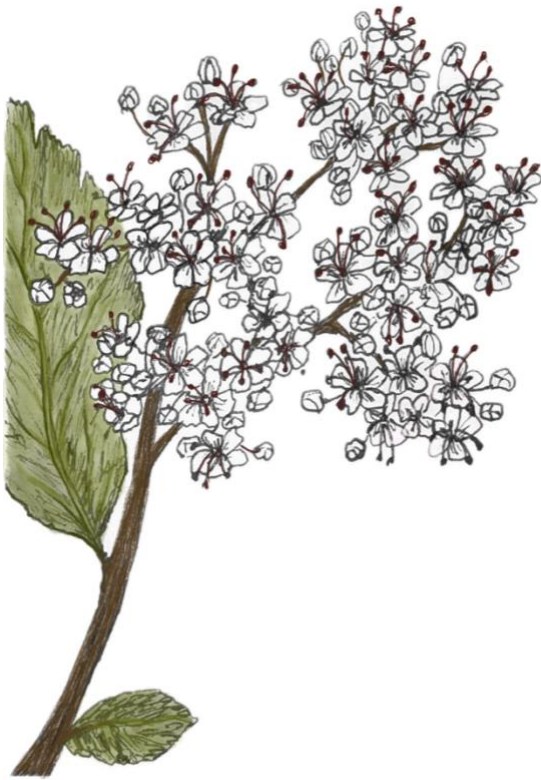


Fig. 12 Wayfarer's flowers

lighted window," (...) "Explain my life to me, you who make no sign, / though I call out to you in the night" (Glück 289). This structured and deliberate parallel exposes a rose reaching toward a presence that may not respond and that, in reality, "disappear[s] into silence" (Glück 289) the same way the Divine does.

In the absence of the caregiver, the speaker acknowledges its mortality and asks them: "Can you survive where I won't last / beyond the first summer?" (Glück 289). As Breslin claims, "Toward the end of the book, the flowers speak in knowledge of their impending deaths" (123) but they do not protest, they accept their mortality with composure. The white rose confronts its approaching death just as the silver lily when it exclaims: "Can you see, over the garden—the full moon rises. / I won't see the next full moon." (Glück 300).

The mirror between the flower and the Gardener is held most explicit when the rose, who "measure[s] aptitude by contrast or analogy with human aptitude" (Gregerson 117), says: "I am not like you, I have only / my body for a voice; I can't / disappear into silence—" (Glück 289). The Divine, in this case the Gardener in his position, can withdraw into silence, but the rose cannot. Its voice is bodily, physical, finite and fragile, as the final em dash represents an unfinished thought or the enviable ability of God to remain silent. Even if the Gardener is taking God's place in the addressee "you", the rose's speech prophesies the condition the Gardener is about to face in "Vespers": God's

voice will disappear and the human speaker will be left with only a body for a voice and the inability to follow where the Divine withdraws.

And in the cold morning
over the dark surface of the earth
echoes of my voice drift,
whiteness steadily absorbed into darkness

as though you were making a sign after all
to convince me you too couldn't survive here

or to show me you are not the light I called to
but the blackness behind it.

(“The White Rose” lines 15-22)

The poem ends in a revelation. Even though the rose has pursued light in its journey, looking at the “lighted window (...) by the flickering leaves” from a shadowed place “in the night” (Glück 289), the flower discovers that “whiteness [is] steadily absorbed into darkness” (Glück 289). The light it wanted to reach was a projection because “you are not the light I called to / but the blackness behind it” (Glück 289), revealing that the rose has seen beyond the light to what was always there. As Hadjiyiannis observes, darkness in *The Wild Iris* is never fully quenched, even when the sun emerges, the darkness of the garden persists (42). The rose, addressing its caregiver “at the bright window”, perceives not a divine figure but a mortal one, enveloped in the same darkness as “a sign after all / to convince me you too couldn't survive here” (Glück 289). Their shared suffering and consciousness of mortality draw the flower and the Gardener into an unprecedented proximity. With the white rose and a darkened Gardener, Glück continues flowing between opposites. As Chevalier states, “Light is paired with darkness to symbolize the complementary or sequential qualities of an evolution” (600). In a personal journey toward the light, darkness, and thus suffering, are essentially transformative.

4.2. “Vespers”: Rupture Between the Gardener and the Divine

“Vespers” opens amidst the collapse of divine communication: “Your voice is gone now; I hardly hear you.” (Glück 296). Even the language proves the spiritual rupture the Gardener is experiencing: “your voice is gone” is a statement of fact; God’s voice is not fading; it has already disappeared. Then, “I hardly hear you” is the residual perception of the voice and the Gardener registers in real time this loss, mid-line, provoking a sense of live rupture.

Your starry voice all shadow now
and the earth dark again
with your great changes of heart.

(“Vespers” lines 2-4)

A chromatic transformation takes place when the “starry voice [turns] all shadow now” (Glück 296), as this cosmological metaphor goes from light to dark, and in this darkness the speaker recognizes God’s absence (Hadjiyiannis 42). The human speaker, immersed in their despair, sees “the earth dark again” with “the grass going brown in places / under the broad shadows of the maple trees” (Glück 296), which serves as metaphor for decline. Autumn has arrived and with it the image of vivid nature in decay. Once again, the natural landscape mirrors the Gardener’s troubled mindset and the oppression they feel as “Now, everywhere I am talked to by silence” (Glück 296). This silence soon hardens into open accusation, as the speaker turns directly against the divine:

so it is clear I have no access to you;



Fig.13 Lily

I do not exist for you, you have drawn
a line through my name.

In what contempt do you hold us
to believe only loss can impress
your power on us.

(“Vespers” lines 8-13)

The accusatory tone of the Gardener, as God has drawn “a line through my name” (Glück 296), reaches beyond personal abandonment into the negation of existence: “I do not exist for you” (Glück 269). As Morris declares, “With no access to God (...) the speaker’s faith in absence and loss as signs of divine presence must suffice, must lead her through the fear that if God does exist then she does not exist for God” (228). Then, the speaker shifts from “I” to “us”: “In what contempt do you hold us”, making it a charge against the entire theology requiring human suffering as proof of divine power since “only loss can impress / your power on us” (Glück 296).

However, the poem’s general setting of rupture, accusation and suffering takes a quiet but decisive shift in the one-sentence stanza: “the first rains of autumn shaking the white lilies” (Glück 296). The white flowers bear under the rain, just as the Gardener prevails under all their suffering. The flowers in *The Wild Iris* emerge into the light, thus symbolizing the soul’s awakening after a period of darkness (Hardy 106) and in this poem the white lilies precisely represent this survival since they are shaken by the rain, but not destroyed.

God’s departure is total because “When you go, you go absolutely, / deducting visible life from all things” (Glück 296). There is no comfort in God’s abandonment until the speaker realizes that “not all life” has been deducted. This is a crucial shift but also ambiguous. The poem closes with “lest we turn from you” (Glück 296) which could be interpreted as a thin life thread God withholds not out of mercy but out of control; or it could be read as the Gardener’s first movement toward survival. If in God’s absence

everything is life-lacking, the white lilies should have been destroyed by the rain, but they were not. They remain upward and the Gardener observes it. Even though this ambiguity is left unresolved, the Gardener's reconciliation with their own mortality has made its quiet entrance in "Vespers" and it will be visually portrayed in "The White Lilies".

4.3. "The White Lilies": The Reconciliation with Mortal Life

The botanical choice in "The White Lilies", the poem that "brings everything together" (Davis 54), is deliberate as the lilies are not the only flowers to appear; the poppies feature as well. The rose of "The White Rose" and the lilies in "Vespers" happened to be in a world of divine address but in this poem the "sea of poppies" introduce a more terrestrial register. In symbolic terms, the red poppy represents war commemoration and the dead soldiers, therefore it directly embodies death. The white lily, that has already made its appearance in "Vespers", apart from symbolizing purity and innocence, also stands for love, glory and death (Chevalier 608 - 609). Both flowers portray the Gardener's mortality and their acceptance of it. The red of the poppy and the white of the lily coexist in the poem without cancelling each other and this botanical coexistence is the reconciliation the Gardener could not yet describe in "Vespers".

The garden, once marked by the Divine through the flowers, is now a shared human space: "As a man and woman make / a garden between them like / a bed of stars" (Glück 303). The Gardener is not alone, which recalls "the first garden, Eden, [that] had not one gardener but two, the primal couple, Adam and Eve" (Breslin 121) and the figure of John in "Song". The flowers seem to work as an exact parallel between the Gardener and their companion, almost making the speaker of the first stanza unclear. Considering the flowers a mirror, it could be interpreted that the Gardener, whose voice was directed to God, now finds solace in the human beloved.

Nevertheless, “they linger in the summer evening / and the evening turns / cold with their terror” (Glück 303). Losing the possibility of transcendence did not exempt humanity from their fear of mortality since “the man and woman who made the garden are also helpless and frightened” (Breslin 127) but it is this shared helplessness that binds them. Even if “it / could all end, it is capable / of devastation” and “a churning sea of poppies” awaits them, neither the flowers nor the Gardeners do not flinch from the weight of loss.

In the second stanza, the one that closes *The Wild Iris*, the address is intimate and human. After many unanswered pleas to an absent God, this is the first time in which another presence, human or floral, answers the speaker’s address: “Hush, beloved” (Glück 303). As Vendler claims, “ “The White Lilies” offers a colloquy between two lovers, as one calms the fear of the other” with the old paradox that temporal burial is the avenue to imaginative eternity” (37). The final lines of the poem are the most affirmative of mortality’s acceptance: “It doesn’t matter to me / how many summers I live to return: / this one summer we have entered eternity.” (Glück 303). The lily, mirror of the

Gardener, finds meaning in the present time and finds the experience of “this one summer” fulfilling, which exemplifies no greater acceptance of death.

The last two lines expose the lily’s burial: “I felt your two hands / bury me to release its splendor” (Glück 303). Set in



Fig.14 White Lilies

the past, it is as if the lily has survived this death because, as Hardy explains, “the flower represents an optimistic symbol despite its own burial, as the soul is believed to have no death and, therefore, enters eternal life with joy” (109). Even if the pressure of mortality has been strong on the Gardener, they have finally reconciled themselves with their own bodily finitude and have discovered the soul’s immortality. Since the Gardener represents the “two hands” that bury the lily, as they are their caregiver, they have also understood Nature’s cyclical nature since the lily, *Lilium*, is a “genus of mainly summer-flowering bulbs” (Brickell 621). The Gardener has buried a bulb so a flower might grow afterwards, finally comprehending that their suffering and abandonment, which all end in death, have been necessary to release the magnificence of eternity (Breslin 127).

“The White Lilies” is not only the final poem, it closes the entire chromatic arc that has run through the whole collection. White has been presented in “The White Rose” as the color of projected light and the end of the red rose’s chromatic transformation; in “Vespers” the white lilies symbolized the fragility that resists under the Autumn rain and in “The White Lilies”, white arrives as resolution. It comprises all the colors in *The Wild Iris* and embodies survival, acceptance and the natural cycle of life. The same buried bulb in “The White Lilies” is the same bulb that is reborn in “The Wild Iris”, as the flower clearly explains: “that which you call death / I remember” (Glück 245). That makes *The Wild Iris* a complete symbol of a cycle. What comes back from death may not be the body but the soul and one’s consciousness as the iris confirms: “whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice” (Glück 245).

5. Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to suggest a new perspective on the analysis of Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*. By studying the different flowers of a selection of poems, it has been shown how the chromatic progression of flowers knits a thread through the

entire collection. The sequence of colors structures the compilation as a cyclical journey mirroring the Gardener's own emotional development.

The four most prominent chromatic phases began with purple, marked by a sentiment of alienation and emotional coldness; followed by red with an intensification of feelings and flowers that portrayed deep suffering. The mixed color phase, where multiple flowers bore different colors, represented a sense of doubt, distress and a suspended faith; ending with white, a color depicting a passage from suffering to the acceptance of mortality and the reconciliation with the soul's immortality. Each stage has been grounded in both botanical fact and symbolic meaning.

The triangular tension among the Divine, the Gardener and Nature has also been shifting across the argumentative arc. The initial longing and pleading of the human speaker were not answered by God, thus provoking a sense of divine abandonment. Consequently, the Gardener, passing through moments of doubt and internal conflict, comprehends God's absence and reconciles themselves with the impossibility of transcendence and the futility of blind faith. The speaking flowers anticipated, mirrored and ultimately outlasted the rupture between God and the Gardener, making them not only a gardening backdrop but symbolically charged independent beings with feelings and stories of their own.

The flowers' botanical characteristics uncover the cyclical structure of the collection. Beginning with a bulbous flower that speaks out of burial ("The Wild Iris"), moving over to perennial and annual flowers that meditate on mortality, and then ending with another bulbous flower being buried ("The White Lilies"), *The Wild Iris* reads as a closed loop. Just as the flowers mirror the Gardener's emotional journey, the very structure of the book echoes the flower's natural cycles of life.

The scope of this study has been necessarily selective, therefore an analysis of all the 54 poems of the collection would be a natural extension. Further research could be made on the chromatic progression being a pattern in Glück's other poetry collections, such as *Meadowlands* (1996) or *Averno* (2006).

To conclude, this study has argued that the role of flowers is not secondary and that their symbolism and botanical features are indirect sources of information which serve to fully grasp the meaning of the poems. As a representative image of *The Wild Iris*, the journey of the flowers' colors is, in the end, the Gardener's own journey, functioning like a reflection; like an echo.

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