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## States of Desire in Carol Ann Duffy's Early Love Poetry

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### abstract

In Carol Ann Duffy's first four collections, desire is rarely a beneficent force. For Duffy, selfhood and self-awareness involve a sense of original exile, so the self is fundamentally directed towards completion by the other. Although full communion is impossible, that contact is required to repel the anguished vulnerability experienced in its absence. For Duffy's speakers, rather than effecting the state where the self reaches fulfilment and full expression, desire is disempowering and actively productive of alienation. Her speakers describe fear of engulfment and the evanescence of rapture, as well as how desire can gain value from self-abnegation, or the subjugation of the other. Duffy's poems take up the complex interaction of illusion, trust and linguistic inadequacy in relationships, while in terms of form, the use of first-person lyrics and the dramatic monologue provides the opportunity for close contact, but self-revelation is frequently bound up with evasion.

"I want you and you are not here" (62), begins Carol Ann Duffy's 1987 sonnet "Miles Away".<sup>1</sup> This disarmingly simple statement is at once plea, lament and desire, and the reflection points to the addressee's physical and metaphysical distance from the speaker, in a double recognition of lack or loss. The lack in the self which stimulates a desire for completion in communion with the other becomes a broader fissure, due to the other's perpetual inability, even if he or she is present, to inhabit the deictic "here". As Duffy put it in a 1988 interview with Andrew McAllister, "Even if you are in bed with your beloved there is a sense in which you are forever excluded from any sort of contact" (70). Although full communion or intersubjectivity is impossible, yet that "contact" is required to repel the sense of annihilation threatened in its absence, in the time of "the shortened days / and the endless nights" (126). In the complex interrelation of self and other, desire persists although unsatisfied: the need for contact and its unattainability create a dynamic in which wound and salve are indivisible. The double sense of lack in this desire requires close attention, since it forms one of the more insistent themes of Duffy's love poetry. Examining the nature of this dialectic of self and other, and the forms of its intrinsic desire, its longings and absences, requires consideration of the different positions the self occupies in the relationship, and how the self is represented.

Critical analysis of Duffy's first four collections has focused on her wide-ranging engagement with forms of estrangement: looking over Duffy's 1994 *Selected Poems*, Neil Roberts identified the concept of "outsideness" as extending "far beyond the conventional notion of the outsider as a person set against a norm. Outsideness *is* the norm" (184). There is also a formal preoccupation, since the use of first-person lyrics and the dramatic monologue provides the opportunity for contact which is frequently denied, but although the dialogic is a precondition of even the most basic statements in Duffy's conception of language, personal and linguistic alienation are felt most acutely in the love poems, as they seek to articulate desire. "Telephoning Home", a poem from *Selling Manhattan*, ends with the declaration, "This is me speaking" (*Selling Manhattan* 52), which simultaneously acknowledges and negates a division in linguistic representation, as the speaker appeals for desire to be sincerely reciprocated. Dislocation occurs when the self is most assertive of its own identity and the certainty of its love, and the radical difficulty for many of Duffy's speakers is that desire is actively productive of alienation.

The sense of the self's incompleteness by the other in all its present relationships may have its origin in an initial, overwhelming sense of loss that stimulated the desire for the other. This is what "Homesick", from 1987's *Selling Manhattan*, suggests; here the speaker inclusively announces: "When we love, when we tell ourselves we do, / we are pining for first love" (*Selling Manhattan* 19), pointing to a primary separation — or a forced ejection — from an accustomed place, time or state. The referrals performed by desire for this condition situate

►1 Unless otherwise specified, citations from Duffy's work refer to *Selected Poems*.

the speaker in an atrophying liminality, unable to recover the coveted origin or to find its substitute through incorporation into another state or environment: love is “imperfect”, music an echo, and the light never right, as

We scratch in dust with sticks,  
dying of homesickness  
for when, where, what.

The desired condition is one of transcendence — of the temporal, the geographical and the literal — and one that embodies the absence of conflict and the referrals performed by desire. Language here seemingly offers the opportunity to achieve that state, but the bleakness of the image suggests an impoverished vocabulary and a diminished autonomy: the desired condition may not be fully represented by the ineffective deictics, and those three words also suggest the speaker’s disempowerment, the bewildered and repetitive inability to occupy any temporary point of satisfaction. Rather than being the force through which “home” — whether the original home or a substitutive home — may be found, desire is a form of violation. Furthermore, since “home” becomes more alluring the further away the speaker is, desire gains active power from being denied.

Desire is a constantly mobile force. Duffy frequently figures psychological distance in terms of literal distance: “All childhood is an emigration”, says the speaker of “Originally”, but whereas in “Homesick”, a sense of original loss is monolithic, here the progressive distance from an origin and the encroachment of an alien environment stimulate a possible dislocation of memory in the speaker’s contemporary experience:

Do I only think  
I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space  
and the right place? (66)

Against this anxious list of losses, there is a longing for a return, and, as in “Homesick”, a desire for that return to be permanent. Both self and world are impoverished in what Neil Roberts terms “loss of the feeling of insideness” (185), and the speakers are bound in a chronic mourning, always longing for amelioration by means of regression. The condition of “insideness” is static, a negation of the motive force of desire: to be fully “inside” is to experience plenitude, and plenitude precludes the lack that stimulates desire for a complementary object. Indeed if fissure from the state of “insideness” above implies a diminishment of selfhood, perhaps the “when, where, what” and the “sense of first space / and the right place” above point to the self’s unmediated isolation, a realm inhabited prior to the awareness of the other, as well as “culture and “speech”.

The sensation of being irrevocably “inside” may be synonymous with the condition of the inviolate state of “pure” subject, before the awareness of a world divided into subject and object and the appearance of desire. What I suggest by this nebulous idea may begin to cohere with an illustration from Exodus. In chapter three, God addresses Moses and conveys the meaning of His identity: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (*King James Bible*, Exodus 3.14). God is the embodiment of pure subject, the creator of everything, and thus the source to which everything may refer; He may not be defined in reference to objects, or the other, since this would contradict or diminish His identity, His totality. “I AM” is a close description of the subject that can take no object, the selfhood that cannot suffer this loss. Desire does not exist, because everything willed is effected; there is no dependence on the volition of the other. The pure subject experiences pure “insideness”, or as Sartre conceives it, “Being-in-itself” (630 and *passim*). In human experience, the inhabitation of such a state is precluded by awareness of the other. If desire stems from lack – the division in conceiving of the existence of subject and object – it marks a violation, a diminution.

The inability of substitutive definitions by the other to yield states of reconciliation, and what Peter Sacks calls “the pain and resistance which go into the making of that structure” (xii), as well as the relevance of power, are themes that inform “Close”. The poem’s title may be both adjective / adverb and verb, describing a condition of intimacy as well as the desire for even greater contact. In retiring for the night, the speaker describes sealing off a private space. This space should be intimate, as the embodiment of full contact between self and other, but the enclosure intensifies a reflection upon the speaker’s sensation of disembodiment and distance. A relationship should be a refuge against the hostility of the world depicted in “Homesick” and “Originally”, or against what Matthew Arnold in “Dover Beach” called “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery”, a place where “ignorant armies clash by night” (92); but when analyzed, the relationship yields only bitter fictions inseparable from conflict :

two childhoods stand in the corner of the bedroom  
watching the way we take each other to bits  
to stare at our heart. (117)

The relationship is deconstructed to reveal the essential emptiness at its centre. In Duffy’s conception, self-awareness is divisive or estranging, since it makes us conscious of an original loss of belonging, the hostility of the world, and the fact that consciousness can never grasp itself, as the desire for self-understanding always turns subject into object. Desire infringes autonomy because it offers the illusion of completion or full selfhood through sexual relationships,

simultaneously offering belonging and empowerment while negating them.

The condition of belonging is possible only by means of surrendering the self, and so contact may be rapturous (an end to the crises of isolation and alienating self-awareness), or, as here, annihilating. Both lovers have the meaning of the self determined or monopolized by the other: “You have me like a drawing, / erased, coloured in, untitled, signed by your tongue.” Inseparable from the speaker’s inability to recognize what he or she should or does feel in the relationship, of what “our heart” consists, is the inability to comprehend this image that the other recognizes. The sense of disembodiment is inextricable from a feeling of purely functional experience, directed by desire, of “Undress ··· / Dress again. Undress”, as the speaker watches his or her meaning being constructed by the other. Sartre’s conception of the self “For-the-other” (631) may be useful here, a “self” which the self “is”, but one which it is never able to know or grasp. In the experience of “the Look” (252-302 *passim*) of the other, as Sartre terms it,

The other is ··· the permanent flight of things towards a goal which  
··· escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distance  
··· [It] has stolen the world from me. (255)

It has not only stolen the world from the speaker, precluded embodied experience, but in its active creation of the speaker’s meaning it attempts to subvert him or her to its own authority, in a specific exercise of power: “How the hell / can I win. How can I lose. Tell me again.” Each creates the other’s meaning, in an unstable activity that simultaneously maintains yet threatens the self with engulfment. Contact with the other inhibits the self’s contact with the self, in its inability to provide a stable self-image, and the poem suggests that identity in relationships is merely a competition of narratives. The poem ends with the ghosts of the couple gathering in a mirror, the multiple selves created in the relationship watching the two present fictional selves lying naked in bed. The sense of foreboding insists that the mirror, the relentless game of reflection and misrecognition in which the lovers are involved, will claim their present souls, their current incarnations of selves. The tyranny of contact with the other suggests that self-reclamation is impossible, and it is the active creation of the meaning of the self by the other that makes Duffy’s use of the lyric form heavily ironic: it provides an opportunity to reveal the inability to reveal self-knowledge.

Contact with the other is tyrannical because, as the speaker says, “Love won’t give in.” Desire is essential, and as such, “Close” contrasts markedly with “Talking in Bed”, the Philip Larkin poem which it recalls. A couple lies together in silence, while

Outside, the wind’s incomplete unrest

Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon. (129)

The bleakness of the images of contact that the poem creates — “clouds” condensing, “dark towns” piling up — are paradoxically images of isolation from which the couple in their intimacy are separate. But those sinister clouds and looming towns insidiously creep into the domestic space, providing images for the contact between the couple, which is both uncomfortably close and irrevocably separate. As in Duffy's poem, the lovers are spectral figures, unknowable to each other: there is a fundamental division between people which language may overcome only by insincerity, or through the kind of fissures in semantic correspondence which the last two lines of Larkin's poem exploit. The closest contact humans may have is insincerity, the poem implies, but unlike Duffy's “Close”, desire seems rather less essential here. Larkin's sense of self is inflexible, whereas in Duffy it is fractured, unknowable even to the self, and it is this factor which makes desire in Duffy's poem so essential, since it offers something Larkin would not allow, the illusion that desire can effect the achievement of harmony, communion or an embodied selfhood.

That kind of stability conflicts with the restless force of desire. Part of the unsettling quality of “Close” is that its multiplying ghosts revise a conception of the continually regenerating nature of love. A loss of self-determined identity may be a sacrifice enthusiastically made in the removal to an unpredictable state of love; in Robert Browning's “Two in the Campagna”, the distance between lovers stimulates a renewal of love, a desire for greater intimacy, rather than the despair over violation in Duffy's poem:

I would I could adopt your will,  
See with your eyes, and set my heart  
Beating by yours, and drink my fill  
At your soul's springs, — your part my part  
In life, for good and ill. (137)

By contrast, Duffy's poem suggests that a desired withholding of the self, a resistance to “the Look” of the other may be a precondition in sexual relationships. Desire is not wholly beneficent, and the tentative dismantling of the despotism of contact, by means of withdrawal into the self or the assertion of the self in extreme denial of the autonomy of the other, is examined in Duffy's immensely clever poem “Psychopath”. The speaker relates two instances of seemingly traumatic childhood experience, specifically concerning sex. The first memory, of “Dirty Alice” (44), who jeer[s] at the twelve-year-old speaker's penis, constitutes sexual humiliation and refusal. The refusal of the other to

acknowledge the self—in the negation of the speaker’s sexual urge—oppresses the self’s freedom. Similarly the speaker’s second memory, of witnessing his mother in bed with “the Rent Man”, plays out the unexpectedly altered meaning of the other undetermined by the self, and thus the impoverishment of the self’s power in the relationship of self and other. The conceit of the poem is that the speaker subsequently uses sexual experience as a means of recovering the self’s freedom, through the negation of the other’s freedom. Sex and sexual attraction become complicit with death.

“I run my metal comb through the D. A. and pose / my reflection between dummies in the window at Burton’s” (43), says the speaker, and his recovery of his sense of autonomy in a world he can control depends upon the awareness and construction of reflections and surfaces. Objectifying references to women, such as “She was clean”, and “No, she said, *Don’t*, like they always do”, point to the assault of the other, in refusing to recognize anything more than misogynistic stereotypes. But the freedom of the self is also annulled, in the manner of a preemptive strike, immunizing the self against assault by anyone else. “I don’t talk much. I swing up beside them and do it / with my eyes. Brando”, the speaker states, and “When I zip up the leather, I’m in a new skin”, before “My breath wipes me from the looking glass”. In the concealing “skin”, and the breathing or speaking of obscurity, the self is known to be continually withheld, and the aspect of the self that the speaker chooses to project for the other’s recognition has been actively constructed as specious. It is this instrument which is employed in the necessary self-protective attack upon the freedom of the other.

This idea is performed in the speaker’s central narrative, his “seduction” of a girl at the fairground and the subsequent rape and murder. What is sought is not contact with the other, absorption into the self, but the denial of contact through its destruction, the denial of the other’s power to have any influence whatsoever on the self. However, autonomy comes at the price of constantly needing the other, to deny the other’s power.

Antony Rowland suggests that the poem is “the nadir” of Duffy’s “amorous lyrics”, where “paedophilia forms the extreme point of a continuum of the infantilisation of women in male discourses of desire” (66). It is unclear from the poem whether the speaker is a paedophile, but “Psychopath” is an extreme illustration of the kinds of desire, power relations and role-playing which run through sexual relationships in Duffy’s poetry. “Close” examined the creation of the self’s meaning by the other, whereas this poem looks at the creation of the self’s meaning by the self. In reference to Robert Browning’s “In a Gondola”, and “A Woman’s Last Word”, Isobel Armstrong writes that

Browning explores another way of limiting the autonomy of the person you love, which is to create an image which is offered to the loved one as a possible way of being, a possible role. Of course, all love requires and

lives upon this act of imagination. (288)

Browning examined the extreme interrelationship of desire and control in “My Last Duchess”; in “Porphyria’s Lover”, he took up the theme of ultimate desire as the destruction of the other. “Porphyria’s Lover” suggests the erotic nature of death, since murder occurs at a moment of intimacy, when the victim reveals her absolute devotion:

Happy and proud; at last I knew  
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise  
Made my heart swell, and still it grew  
While I debated what to do.  
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,  
Perfectly pure and good: I found  
A thing to do, and all her hair  
In one yellow string I wound  
Three times her little throat around,  
And strangled her. (18)

The casual nature of the decision — “I found a thing to do” — implies both the logical and illogical progression in events: if the girl belongs to the boy, then she is his to destroy, yet the murderous impulse denies the reader’s co-experiencing of the emotion.

Similarly, “Psychopath” seems deliberately to invite and repel understanding of the speaker’s desire. Following the confessions of the murder of the girl (and possibly the mother), and in the continuing compulsion to attract the other at the end of the poem, the refusal of the tyranny of contact through its destruction seems to be a continuous pursuit for the speaker. But to conclude this would be both a trivialization of the subject matter, and too uncomfortably close to an expedient psychology. From the title itself — a “psychopath” is not necessarily a killer — the interest of the poem lies in its equivocation. This is achieved by the dialogic method of the monologue, by the self-reflexivity of the narrative in which the speaker’s knowing commentary is embedded. The poem employs competing specialized registers, the effect of which is most striking in the final stanza:

My reflection sucks a sour Woodbine and buys me a drink. Here’s  
looking at you. Deep down I’m talented. She found out. Don’t mess  
with me angel, I’m no nutter. Over in the corner, a dead ringer  
for Ruth Ellis smears a farewell kiss on the top of a gin-and-lime.  
The barman calls Time. Bang in the centre of my skull,  
there’s a strange coolness. I could almost fly. Tomorrow

will find me elsewhere, with a loss of memory. Drink up son,  
the world's your fucking oyster. A wopbopaloobopalopbimbam. (46)

The cleverness, density and dexterity of the poem here are tremendous. Throughout the poem there have been hints pointing to the insincerity of the persona, but in this stanza the concentrated juxtaposition of the incongruous registers and contrasting tones enables a recognition of the mask and its hyperbole. Unlike Browning's "My Last Duchess", where what is unsaid enables the reader to establish the fact of murder, here the hyperbole of the speaker enables us to discount the possibility of murder and sincerity. The voice of the "psychopath" is present in the overly blatant joke of the second line above, and the ridiculously bad pun in the third line; a "poetic" language occurs in the fourth line, together with literary allusions in the following line. Throughout the poem the speaker's statements in these three registers are overwhelmingly facile and clichéd, both linguistically and imagistically. From the "ducking and diving" of the poem's opening to the speaker's faux-ignominy of seeing his mother in bed with the Rent Man — to the dog defecating by a lamp-post as he rapes the girl, the use of cliché is relentless and extreme. The intermittent "poetic" register in turn conveys only the hollowness of hyperbolic irony. In stanza 5, "the dull canal" where the girl is killed alludes to that in "The Fire Sermon", part 3 of Eliot's "The Waste Land" (60) and the fifth line of the extract above recalls the end of "A Game of Chess", where the barman repeatedly calls "Time" (58); indeed, the next word in the line, "Bang", may allude to the end of Eliot's "The Hollow Men": "This is how the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" (82). If the allusions are ironic, the use of the former poem points to a desolate mind, and the latter to an admission of the glaring construct of the persona, that the relentless extremity of its words is disingenuous. But it is in their very over-aptness for these communications that it is difficult not to read them as bitterly ironic, as a further self-concealment. As it alludes to Charles Manson ("helter-skelter") and the schizophrenic murderer Ruth Ellis, the poem gives us an example of exactly what we would expect a psychopathic killer to be.

The two main ideas discussed may seem contradictory, in that the examination of the refusal of the other is negated by the exposed artificiality of the persona which recounted it. The poem invites such a reading and then repels it. Through the persona the speaker constructs an intricate performance of his refusal of the other and the withholding of the self, in order to protect its freedom, but of course the persona, this structure serving for the identification of a thing, is not the thing itself — the inviolable self. The self is absent, unrepresented, hence the covering use of irony and cliché, and the poem's reaction against the dramatic monologue form is symptomatic of the directing away from what is not there. The self is present neither wearing the mask nor in its removal. The condition is only enlightened by what seems to be an ingenuous statement at the end: "Drink

up son / the world's your fucking oyster." It is spoken using the readopted voice of the persona, which the speaker has unveiled as fictional, and so the words are devastatingly ironic. That the sentiment of the world's redundancy has been selected to be represented in this voice means that in effect it is a person without a self speaking. In this way the device recognizes the anguished desire to be out of the self, for the annihilation of consciousness or cognition.

Ultimately, "Psychopath"'s subject matter is not the assertion of the self against others, but of the self's assault upon the self, and it is in the resignation of the last stanza that the claustrophobic state of the isolate self is revealed. The self excluded from contact is not bound by it, and the space of the self which can be explored is illimitable. In a Beckettian dynamic, since this space is infinite, there is no escape. Isolation cannot be transcended, so the speaker's mind simply repeats the self-created extreme fantasies, extreme because of the illimitability of the self's cognition alone. Following the exposure of the fantasies as fictional, the encouraging dialogue with the self — "Drink up son" — the disembodied examination of the speaker's reflection smoking and drinking alone, the girl who is not smearing a farewell kiss on her glass, all unveil the situation's awful familiarity, its drudgery and boredom. What would actually be a ridiculous sign-off for a psychopath, "A wopbopaloobopalopbimbam", aptly summarizes the absurd situation experienced by the speaker in his solitude, at such a critical remove in an obscene state of inertia.

The poem suggests that hatred is bound up with desire: desire to escape the self creates the static repetitions of hatred. Like love, hatred can involve desiring a loss of the self, rather than that self coming to fulfilment or empowerment in union with the other. If selfhood is a performance, whether determined by the self or by the other, we should not expect to find cohesive, stable selves in Duffy's love poetry; but if it is a performance, it offers the illusion that the current occupation of a self is transient. The desire of the speaker of "Psychopath" is for an unattainable self-cancellation, which is a form of desire for transcendence of the current self, but its conclusion suggests that selfhood as continually changing performance is an illusion. In a very different poem, "Warming Her Pearls", the repetitions of desire and an unchanging identity role are not restrictive, but offer a vision of fulfilment.

Rather than "the condition and tragedy of us as humans" being "forever excluded from any sort of contact" (McAllister 70), the poem focuses upon the fullness of contact which may be experienced in its actual absence. The speaker is requested by her mistress to wear her pearls, in preparation for an evening engagement, since pearls achieve their finest lustre only from a period of contact with the flesh. Despite the superfluity of the task, it is rendered with great tenderness by the speaker, as she imagines her mistress fanning herself while she works "willingly, my slow heat entering / each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope" (60). A convenient starting-point for considering the poem, at the risk of

►2 Ted Honderich provides a pertinent summary of Hegel's scheme in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 529.

seeming over-literal, is the initial situation described in Hegel's model of Master and Slave. In the relationship the one who attains recognition without reciprocating it becomes the master, while he or she who recognizes, but is not acknowledged, becomes the slave.<sup>2</sup> The condition of the speaker here is that of the slave who adores her chains, and who works "willingly" under the mistress' yoke, signified by the pearls. It is the lack of recognition or awareness of the speaker's affection by the mistress which is the precondition of that desire. Indeed for desire to continue, to ensure its mobility, it must not be satiated, for, in a Lacanian conception,

The "I" of desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content by a negating action that satisfies desire in destroying, transforming and assimilating the desired non-I. (Sarup 17)

In "Porphyria's Lover", desire ends as soon as Porphyria is possessed unconditionally. In "Warming Her Pearls", the focus on the pearls, the delicate interplay of distance and possible contact, of desire and its negation, forms the erotic charge of the poem. Hence there is a concentration upon intimate but nebulous detail which continually hints at its possible solidification into the tangible. Throughout the poem's richness and delicacy of ethereal detail is the constant juxtaposition of activity and passivity, presence and plenitude, absence and lack, which is inseparable from a focus upon colour, adornments (jewellery, perfume, makeup, clothes), slow movement and graceful pose, synaesthesia and silence. The interplay of heat and coldness is central to the poem. The heat gently builds from its inception- the mistress' instruction to warm the pearls – through the imagining of the mistress' activities accompanied by "my slow heat entering / each pearl", the heat increasing despite or because of the mistress' negating fanning, to the point of brushing the mistress' shoulders in front of the mirror, where the speaker stands with her lips parting on the point of speech.

The physical and imaginative peak of arousal is quashed by the coolness and silence of the mirror, by the words that begin the penultimate stanza ("Full moon"), as well as in the servant's repeated imagining of the mistress undressing and getting into bed naked:

And I lie here awake,  
knowing the pearls are cooling even now  
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night  
I feel their absence and I burn. (61)

Following a gentle accretion, the poem decelerates, slowing to a constant condition of enduring need. The final line of lamentation is simultaneously a renewal of desire: the continuous state of burning is created by "absence", the

distance and coolness of the coveted object. The pearls are a metonym of the object of affection, and that it is the pearls' absence which is mourned is symptomatic of the desire. The heat imparted to them by the speaker is a transient but seemingly inexhaustible quality: the sexual heat contained within them, the offering of sexual desire, is offered precisely because it will fade, precisely because the speaker knows her affection will not be recognized. The servant does not want contact or the reciprocation of love — she does not desire the other's desire, the dynamic Hegel identifies as that which makes us human or social — but continued isolation.<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps the poem is more explicit than I have suggested. The overwhelming sensuality in the poem suggests that a masturbatory fantasy is being performed, with the orgasm reaching its completion and expression in the perfect feminine emblem of the “Full moon”, which connotes a plenitude of sensation but also remoteness, the contact absent in masturbation. Since there is no actual interaction with the desired object; the object is not violated, so desire persists. The renewed longing at the poem's end conveys the need to perform the fantasy again, the things which the mistress “always” does in the mind of the speaker, not to make it real. For the established structure of desire to be changed would constitute the destruction of that desire; for desire to endure, it must be non-productive.

As it is, the speaker and her fantasy recall the thrush in Robert Browning's “Home-Thoughts, from Abroad”, who “sings each song twice over, / Lest you should think he never could recapture / The first fine careless rapture!” (44). However, rather than the speaker of “Psychopath”, who desires escape from the imprisoning self and its repetitions, the speaker of “Warming Her Pearls” seeks a state of continuing stasis. The agency the speaker expresses in the fantasy is one of wilful subordination, yet it is an empowerment at a safe distance from the destructive kind of self-definition that love offers in “Close”, where a loss of self or autonomy is the price of the greater emotional intensity, whether good or bad, which may come from actual contact with the other. Yet in “Warming Her Pearls”, desire still creates dependence, and the speaker's desire for continuing stasis is oxymoronic, since desire itself is not static: it escalates and fades, and it is this quality which creates the pleasurable pain at the poem's end. Furthermore, in the diminishing echo of repetition, in the replaying of the actions or the fantasy, the distance required to ignite desire may become familiar; and the vicarious plenitude the speaker experiences — the sense of belonging in a lack of contact — may diminish in intensity over time.

Duffy's various speakers attempt to represent desire and the states of belonging it achieves, in their evanescence and their intensity, without that intensity being motionless or singular. Again, Browning's “Two in the Campagna” is relevant: the speaker laments the fact that he cannot possess or understand his wife in totality — “I would that you were all to me, / You that are

►3 See Sarup, 20.

just so much, no more” — nor hold to or depict a moment of absolute joy in the relationship — “Already how am I so far / Out of that minute?” — anguished in the inability fully to express that emotional experience, aware of the disjunction between “Infinite passion, and the pain / Of finite hearts that yearn” (137-8). Duffy gives expression to these feelings in “Miles Away”, where “Even your name / is a pale ghost and, though I exhale it again / and again, it will not stay with me” (62), while “Words, Wide Night”, from *The Other Country* (1990), laments the inability of consciousness to express a fullness of sensation. The poem asks itself a romantic question: if words register an absent presence, if they are imperfect, how can love, which should be all certainty and distinctness, a present plenitude, be expressed in words? Physically separated, the lovers are also alienated by language. Different tenses, active and passive verb forms, deictics and meaninglessness — “La lala la” (86) — create an effect of inarticulacy. The speaker’s incommunicable longing is seemingly countered by the resigned affection of the last lines, “For I am in love with you and this / is what it is like, or what it is like in words”. In the first part of the sentence, preceding the word “or”, the hackneyed declaration and the referral to the previous inarticulate lines confirm the clichéd idea of a love so powerful it may not be harnessed by or expressed in words, and thus plenitude is conveyed inversely. A depiction of language’s inadequacy and indistinctness paradoxically communicates an abundant love. But the second part of the sentence, “or what it is like in words”, renews that very linguistic inefficacy, a link also provided by the repeated simile of the last line. In this further removal, the speaker acknowledges that he or she is unable to communicate the fact that he or she is unable to communicate an emotion so intense that it may not be expressed in language. The initial distance established in the first word “Somewhere”, is extrapolated and broadened in a continued deferral, which locates the speaker at a bleak remove from the original implied experience of contact that has demanded articulation.

In the attempt to depict complete contact with the other, the anxious noise, slippage and distance which are uncovered suggest that the faithful manifestation of that state of plenitude or temporarily sated, static desire, is silence. Indeed this sentiment is echoed in Ian Gregson’s feeling that

For Duffy, love is another country and speaks another language and her vision of fulfilment requires that it be inhabited imaginatively and non-violently — without, that is, violating its rich otherness.

(106)

Mutual love is the perfect embodiment of the fullness of contact between self and other, and its most natural representation is silence. But for that silence to be communicable and meaningful, it must inhabit a mutually recognisable interpersonal space, a space created wherein that silence may speak.

Unlike the relationship deconstructed in “Close”, and its blank, barren centre, this space must be — however far it is possible — free of fiction-making and the manoeuvrings of power. “Moments of Grace”, from 1993’s *Mean Time*, reprises the idea of this complete sense of belonging, the state whose loss was nostalgically mourned in “Homesick” and “Originally”. The speaker sits “dream[ing] through a wordless, familiar place”, absorbed in the remembrance of the ideal space, of moments like being “Shaken by first love and kissing a wall” (111). The evaporation, the progressive distancing from childhood memory, is again lamented, in an irreversible emigration from intimacy and totality, but the key progression here from the earlier poems is an acceptance of the bereavement. The speaker’s memories may be irrecoverable, but there is a sense in which to re-inhabit them would be to diminish their intensity. Yet they persist, comfortingly, as private relics, and the work of mourning is inextricable from reattachment, moving from loss to a new space of belonging with the other. The speaker can smell an orange being peeled in the next room:

Now I take off my watch, let a minute unravel  
in my hands, listen and look as I do so,  
and mild loss opens my lips like No.  
Passing, you kiss the back of my neck. A blessing. (112)

The distance between self and other in the speaker’s self-absorption provides a space in which the gesture can be meaningfully performed. This gesture is part of a private vocabulary, similar to the speaker’s investing of objects with particular meanings, or the sustaining fictions, in “Warming Her Pearls”, and the gesture reclaims the distance between self and other to unite them, but it does not posit the speaker back in contemporary experience. In drawing up the exposed distance, the gesture directs the speaker away, removing him or her to a space of full contact with the other. This sacred state, indicated by the “blessing”, and the beautiful silence, stillness and ordinariness of the rest of the poem, is a substitution for, but a mirror-image of, the state of childhood belonging mourned earlier. But it is inseparable from contemporary experience with the other, and activated only by the gesture of the other. Indeed as the above lines reflect, the state may not be actively sought, and thus it is not permanently inhabitable. The gesture activates an unmediated communication, but it can only indicate the space, the removal to an ethereal suspension of consciousness, of complete “insideness” and immanence, a state which is accessed in communion with the other, yet outside immediate experience.

The existence of the space depends upon the achievement of a delicate positional balance of self and other. In anatomising various forms of desire, Duffy’s first four collections identify the complex interactions of power, repetition, illusion, trust, hatred and fear, as well as inadequacy, whether personal

or linguistic. Desire is rarely a beneficent force, and never unproblematic. “Homesick” and “Originally” take up the dislocations in contemporary experience effected by an original loss of a state of belonging, while “Close” analyses the speaker’s lack of knowledge and power in the experience of rapture or engulfment. “Psychopath” offers a sinister picture of the interaction of hatred and desire, where superficially desire gains value from the need to abnegate the other, in an aggressive means of self-validation that covers a real desire to escape a devastated self. The speaker of “Warming Her Pearls” finds contentment in subjugation and the repetition of limited, estranged experience, while “Words, Wide Night” mourns the inefficacy of language either in creating or describing a condition of belonging. It is only in “Moments of Grace” that we gain a glimpse of desire achieving a condition of joy free from the anxieties and manipulation, the incompatibilities and delusions, of the other poems.

The gesture in “Moments of Grace” constitutes a small moment of epiphany, providing access to the experience of plenitude between self and other, a vulnerable space of faith created by desire and the acknowledgement of the other’s desire. Nevertheless, the space of “insideness” or contact indicated at the end of the poem is equivocal. The “blessing” performed is only described as such by one who continually requires redemption; the feeling of “insideness” may be both celebration and consolation. The elusiveness and intermittent revelation of the state of plenitude perpetuate its desirability, and the longing for its maintenance and continued manifestation is an act of prayer. But those qualities of plenitude and transience may encourage a devotion so fervent that, in its potential failure, in the absence of the revelation, the suppliant experiences an equally extreme but more enduring desolation.

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