

The Materialization of Kristeva's Chora Into Carol Ann Duffy's "The Grammar of Light"

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Abstract

This paper aims at approaching Carol Ann Duffy's poem, "The Grammar of Light", from the theoretical perspective of Julia Kristeva's chora. Both Duffy and Kristeva are concerned with language and its signifying process in relation to sensory experience. In writing this poem, Duffy deliberately employs the terms of linguistics and visual experience to construct her imaginary grammar of light, while Kristeva's major proposition, the semiotic and the symbolic, encourages the transgression of the formal signifying system of language and connects it to the realm of the psycho-somatic. As a result, by proposing "The Grammar of Light" serves as a framework to materialize Kristevan chora, this paper sets out to analyze how the poem reworks the semiotic mode of signification.

Key words: Carol Ann Duffy; "The Grammar of Light" Julia Kristeva; The semiotic; The symbolic

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INTRODUCTION

It is obvious Duffy employs an interesting conceit in the title of "The Grammar of Light" by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated subjects: grammar and light. Grammar is identified with language, the signs we use for communication and articulation while light, the medium

that helps us see things, is belonged to the sensory experience. However they can be both seen as conceptual modalities in the light of Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, for language and sensory experience are formal and non-verbal signifying systems respectively, or in Kristeva's terms, the symbolic and semiotic. The semiotic, featuring in instinctual energies and drives, is related to chora, a term Kristeva borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* to refer to a space associated with the mother or a maternal stage anterior to sign and syntax. Non-verbal as it is, the semiotic has recourse to symbolic coded structures in so far as it gets accepted in a cultural framework. So we should accept the differences of the semiotic and the symbolic and put these modes in parallel. In this regards, "The Grammar of Light" can be seen as the representation or verbalization of the non-expressive sensory experience underlying language. Therefore, it is the relevance of the key terms, grammar and light, to Kristeva's concepts of the symbolic and semiotic helps to formulate my hypothesis about the materialization of Kristeva's chora into Carol Ann Duffy's poem "The Grammar of Light".

1. DUFFY'S LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND KRISTEVA'S SEMIOTIC CHORA

To be the first woman, the first Scot and the first lesbian holding the post of Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy is indisputably unprecedented. Once talking about her life and writing career, she said, "In life I continue to be a fairly nice woman. In poetry I fight it. I try to keep in mind Virginia Woolf's image of the Angel in the House who strangles the writer" (Dowson & Entwistle, 2005, p.190). So some of her works attempt to identify with women's experience. Her study in Liverpool University from 1974 to 1979 develops her interests in Wittgenstein's language philosophy. Hence, the exploration into language and its problem has to some extent become a hallmark in her poetry and leads her into a poetic experiment of

language. Duffy's language anxiety lies in the problems that language presents as a system of signification, just as Michael J. Woods stated, "Duffy frequently draws attention to its [language's] inability to convey what human beings wish to convey" (2005, p.7). In order to bypass this weakness of language being sometimes an unsuccessful mediator between sign and idea, Duffy has to resort to experience. Deryn Rees-Jones writes in her monograph,

For Duffy an exploration of the relationship between language and experience always dramatizes the gap between signifier and signified; between what is about to be said, and what is then said; between the possibility of what might be said, and what can never be said. And this distrust of language leads her to an aesthetic that privileges experience over the telling of the experience. (2001, p.14)

Such an aesthetic value thus establishes Duffy's poetic advocacy of emotion. She seems dissatisfied with what words and narrative can denote and tends to differentiate her language from that of "male novelists and dramatists". Once interviewed by Jeanette Winterson, she said,

Male novelists and dramatists are getting very documentary now, aren't they? As though that is somehow more serious. Poetry can't be documentary. I'm not sure that any of the arts should be—but poetry, above all, is a series of intense moments—its power is not in the narrative. I'm not dealing with facts, I'm dealing with emotion. (Duffy, 2005)

Duffy's emphasis on experience and emotion more than narrative corresponds to Bulgarian-French theorist, Julia Kristeva's treatment of language as a "dynamic signifying process" in which bodily experience, namely "affect", are expressed through people's use of language (Oliver, 1997, p.xx). She believes that signifying process operates in two modes, the semiotic, which "consists of drive-related and affective meaning organized according to primary processes whose sensory aspects are often non-verbal (sound and melody, rhythm, color, odors, and so forth)" and the symbolic, "linguistic signification that is manifested in linguistic signs and their logico-syntactic organization." (Kristeva, 1995, p.104) So the semiotic involves a discharge of feeling or emotion through non-verbal ways while the symbolic with expressions of clear and orderly meaning through the use of logical terms. Both are working in different stages of the signifying process and do not necessarily form an opposing dichotomy. Rather, in her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that meaning or force of language does not lie in grammar, syntax or vocabulary, but is readable largely on the basis of the "poetic and affective aspects of texts" (McAfee, 2004, p.14).

If there happens to be some overlap between Duffy and Kristeva in exploring language in connection with bodily experience, then "The Grammar of Light" might embody a return to the maternal, feminine and unsignifiable stage previous to the establishment of patriarchal language. In order to present the heterogeneous semiotic at work, the normal rules of syntax and semantics are constantly

disrupted in the poem so that readers may be invited to revisit, reconsider and reconstruct their own emotions.

2. KRISTEVAN READING OF "THE GRAMMAR OF LIGHT"

Contrary to Duffy's usual dialogic preference, "The Grammar of Light" represents a speechless world of sight. Apart from natural light, Duffy also depicts how reflection of light or artificial light, such as match light and a neon light alters the feeling and perception. The framework of the poem traces the day out following the shift of light from the night, morning, day to evening until it wanes at midnight. This progressive yet cyclic structure draws readers into a silent retrospection of sensory experience at different stages.

2.1 Dark Room Motif and Semiotic Chora

The initial dark room image in "The Grammar of Light" seems to suggest Kristeva's semiotic chora. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva explains that in this pre-language stage, the subject is experiencing a wealth of drives, such as feelings and instincts, which on one hand discharges and on the other hand are contained and regulated by family and social structures. "In this way the drives... articulate what we call a chora... the process by which significance is constituted" (1984, pp.25-26). Thus the non-verbal semiotic signification comes from a rhythm of motility and regulation. In the poem, this process is achieved through "a meaningless O"¹. Though light is bare and seeing is difficult in the dark room, the instinctive impulse of love still enable the subject to fulfil the goal as indicated in "Even barely enough light to find a mouth, and bless both with a meaningless O, teaches, spells out." This O might be meaningless in semantic level, but emphasis on semiotic dimensions entails the significance beyond the literal meaning. In terms of the semiotic representation in poetic language, Anne-Marie Smith delineates the manifestations of Kristeva's semiotic order as repetitions, rhythms, rhyme, alliteration, intonations, onomatopoeia, tone, modulation of voices, word-play, and tears (1998, p.22). Hence, this part can be read as a depiction of a sensuous moment with the alliteration of "b", a burst of bilabial sound mimicking the sound of a kiss. The sensory pleasure is even more enhanced by the capitalized O, shaping a quasi-mouth exclaiming. Since this stage of signification is more affect-driven than logical, "meaningless O" reflects the discharge of the primordial desire and meanwhile the restraint of expression.

However, the indefinite subject and lack of object create an ambiguity contributing to a mysterious quality of this sensory experience. If the primordial desire is to be

¹ "The Grammer of Light" is referred to Duffy, C. A. (2004). *New Selected Poems 1984-2004*. London: Picador.

regulated, then what "meaningless O" teaches and spells out is worth noting. "spell" is a polysemy, with meanings as diverse as "to make understandable" and "to enact an irresistible charm". Polysemy is seen by Kristeva as a result of "semiotic polyvalence—an adherence to different sign systems" (1984, p.60). Thus the meanings of the polysemy could produce utterly different results. On one hand, the sensory experience intensifies the understanding of love, so it constructs; on the other hand, it enacts a bewitching power under a spell of love, so it destructs. Interestingly Kristeva in her *Time and Sense* likens literary activity to a dark room, in which "sensory experience can be slowly processed, seen and understood in the wider context of interpersonal experience" (Smith, 1998, p.28). As a result, it needs a wider context to understand whether the teaching of "meaningless O" is to construct or destruct.

2.2 Language Experience and Thetic Break

Then the poem's first streak of light is let in as a curtain "opened at night lets in neon, or moon, or a car's hasty glance, and paints for a moment someone you love, pierces". This light scene emulates a Lacanian mirror stage, in which the inconstant quality of the glistening neon, the dim moonlight and the fleeting car lamp have a sort of special effect to intensify or shadow the other whom looks as if being pierced. "Pierce" becomes a pun, when the infiltration of light visualizes the other as well as separating the subject from the other, wherefore representing what Kristeva calls the thetic break. The thetic break is necessary to prepare the subject for metaphoric or metonymic use of language, just as Kristeva writes, "we view the thetic phase... as the precondition for signification, i.e., the precondition for the positing of language. The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic" (1984, p.48).

Different language experiences are then revealed with "so many mornings to learn", as if different light effects in a cloudy, rainy or sunny day can produce different sensory impressions. At this threshold to language, some sensory experience might be unpleasant, just like "the day is wrung from damp, grey skies", in which "wrung" implies separation and a sense of reluctance. Moreover, a faintly miserable picture is depicted with someone leaving, another image of separation. The emphasis on the room and breakfast suggests a B&B, not a home. According to Kristeva, the feeling of being un-home-like conjures up a memory of the self in the maternal chora, which then leads to an anxiety termed "maternal abjection", since unconsciously one desires to fall back into the maternal chora for comfort and self-satisfaction; however, the regression also brings about an anxiety of losing one's subjectivity (McAfee, 2004, pp.48-49). This frustration ultimately ushers in a state of disconsolation as shown in "a wasteground weeps glass tears at the end of a street". One of Kristeva's famous hypotheses is melancholia,

which points to the importance of the mother playing in the child's acquisition of language. The loss of the mother before incorporating the thetic break will result in a sense of wound in the depressed subject, who sees the loss as an unnamable thing, or "a light without representation" (1989, p.13).

Some sensory/ language experience is more successful, or "fluent". The bird image resonates the Socratic metaphor of ideas, since in *Theaetetus* Socrates compares the human mind to a birdcage and ideas or knowledge to birds (1973, p.199a). The trees thinking in birds might be against the logical signification but can be made possible through "telepathise", a transference by which significance is worked out through moving beyond the formal signifying system and connecting it to something outside it. Therefore, "think in birds" connects the signifier (sound-image: bird) to the signified (meaning: idea or thinking). Such a condensation sees the influence of the semiotic, because before being contained by the symbolic, the thetic break will be first of all give rise to a semiotic fragment with metaphoric or metonymic value as an outlet for the sense of loss caused by the separation. More intended verbal fallacies are thus created through different types of metaphors and metonyms, such as "the waiter balances light", "the coins in his pocket silver" and "a young bell...ready to tell". The light in the waiter's hands is a metonym of the tray, as the tray can radiate light. The coin shines silver in the pocket through the transferred epithet, a kind of displacement of modifier. The bell can be young and tell, for it has been endowed human quality through personification, an ontological metaphor. These expressions are more literary than grammatical, yet it forms an interesting dialectic relationship: both constructing and destructing the linguistic structure.

Kristeva sees all imaginative practice, such as art and poetry, representing such a dialectic relationship, since it articulates the instinctual drives of the subject while submitting them to a "socially admissible code". Such dialectic forms "the very condition of *jouissance*" (qtd. in Smith, 1998, p.17). Consequently, the thetic break is likely to raise fear or anxiety. The failure to internalize this break may even engender psychosis. However, it can also produce *jouissance*, for in this threshold to language expression, the symbolic and the semiotic can work as inseparable conceptual modalities with the latter either energizing or subverting the former. In this regards, "the meaningless O" puzzle seems to work in the same dialectic relationship.

2.3 Death Motif and Return to Chora

Contrast to the leaving-home motif in the morning, evening sees the returning-home motif, "you walk home under the muted lamps, perplexed". As aforesaid, the unhomelike anxiety induces desire for regression, which suggests a loss of one's subjectivity. Therefore the returning-home motif assumes a state of death.

Although the atmosphere is permeated with silence and anxiety, optimism is faintly shown in “a saucer of rain... speaks to the eye”, “the little fires...undressing in veils of mauve smoke” and “the shy stars go stuttering on”. In reaction to the sensory/ language anxiety, this returning-home scene expects healing. In melancholia, Kristeva posits that the unnamable anxiety resists articulation, so the melancholic barely speaks and there is no word to signify his/her sadness. As a cure, the melancholic subject has to reconcile the loss of the mother through “primary identification” with the “father in individual prehistory” (1989, p.13). This imaginary father is not Lacanian stern Symbolic Father who threatens with castration, but according to Kelly Oliver, a “father-mother conglomerate”, a transference between a semiotic mother and an ideal and kind symbolic father (1991, p.52). More than paternal intervention, Kristeva emphasizes the mother’s importance as the bridge to speech. Such is the foundational importance of the chora, since through the ability of imitating the mother’s rhythm of speech, the infant thereby incorporates the mother’s pattern of language. So the imaginary father is the signified meaning of mother, who helps the subject complete its separation from the enigmatic sense of loss, identify with the symbolic order, and ultimately settle in the realm of language. In the poem, stars become the metaphor for the imaginary father, since the twinkling of the stars is powered by the solar energy, a paternal metaphor. What’s more, the sight of twinkling stars is made in relation to the attempted uttering, “stuttering”. Consequently, by identifying with the signified meaning of mother in replace of the sound-image mother, the potential of language is made possible.

Following the diurnal process of light, the poem descends into midnight. Death motif also dominates the last stanza: candle’s burning out and the encroaching darkness reflect the elapse of time; the blurring faces associate with dreams; “The flare of another match” suggests the brevity of life; “everything dies” implies things merged with the dark. Similar to the leaving-returning-home cycle, the poem here returns to the beginning and forms a circle. The circularity in “Shadows circle the table”, “dreams...held in the eyes” and the halo of the flaring match echoes the initial “meaningless O”. Yet contrary to the speechless darkness in the beginning, here is a room with faint light and speech. These burning out lights contribute to perfect overlap between seeing and speaking by the witty use of “slurs”. “Slur” refers to the melting and sliding of the wax as the candle burns and simultaneously hints the drunken speech. This sense of speech is later accentuated by “flatters”. This same-yet-different structure once again works out what Kristeva acclaims a dialectic relationship. It seems to reiterate the inseparable quality of the semiotic to the symbolic and that the maternal chora is the ultimate signifier, a place to revisit multifarious representations of emotions.

CONCLUSION

Duffy deliberately employs the terms of linguistics and visual experience to construct her imaginary grammar of light. This sensory impression does not produce orderly expressions; instead it helps to reconceive the world in ambiguous manifestation. In corresponding to this subversive grammar, Duffy disrupts the syntax and grammar in the poem by writing fragmentary sentences and by linking disparate things in the form of metaphors and metonyms. The repetition of “the way” in every stanza keeps reminding readers that one must not look at the semantic meaning of the lines but go beyond and outside the linguistic bits to feel how sensory experience rework or reinvent the expressions. As it has been appreciated in this paper, a Kristevan reading of “The Grammar of Light” emphasizes on the artificiality of language and how the semiotic mode of signification is concomitantly at work. By linking linguistics with psychoanalysis, Kristeva sees the bodily drives as the nocturnal power to facilitate the signifying process in the non-verbal aspects. Thus reading the poem in the light of Kristevan concept of chora will undoubtedly provide a space to undermine the linguistic construction and recognize that something different, heterogeneous, and defamiliarizing in language can be the lost territory whereby to feel the real.

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