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**“Let me make myself crystal”. T. S. Eliot, postmodernism, and the deceptive transparency of clichés in the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy**

This speaks to me, of that of which I have long aimed, in writing poetry; to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music* (Eliot 2015: 894).

Taken from an unpublished lecture on “English Letter Writers” delivered in the winter of 1933, T. S. Eliot’s words on transparency as the ideal end to which poetry should aspire are densely layered, interlaced as they are within a complex canvas of erudite references and open cultural debates. What did Eliot mean when he referred to “poetry which is *essentially* poetry” (my emphasis)? What are we “meant to see through the poetry”, and what is it that poetry “points at”? The answers to these questions are certainly not exhausted in the contextual reference to a letter written by D. H. Lawrence to Catherine Carswell, in which the English novelist and poet argued that the essence of poetry is “stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere” (quoted in Eliot 2015: 894).

Shall Eliot’s words be addressed through the lenses of a (post-)Romantic sensibility? This is what his claim that poetry should get “*beyond poetry*, as Beethoven [...] strove to get *beyond music*” may suggest. Against the grain of Eliot’s statement we can read the remark

attributed to the German composer by Elizabeth Brentano (later known as Bettina von Armin) in a letter to Goethe (1810): "music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind, but which mankind cannot comprehend" (quoted in Sullivan 1936: 4). Interpreting Eliot against this intertext goes in the direction of recent studies which have been underlying the complexity and instability of Eliot's relationship to Romanticism. It has been observed that the major English Romantic poets are a significant presence in Eliot's poetry. For example, in her study of "Burnt Norton", Francesca Cauchi shows that while Eliot's poetry harbours suspicions of the evanescence of redemptive ideals, it is also permeated by the "desire to transcend the limits of temporality through the positing of an ideal world or essence" (2017: 62). Michael O'Neill, drawing on Eliot's essay on Baudelaire to outline how both poets, despite their refusal of Romantic sentimentality, may be regarded as "offspring" and "heirs" of Romanticism, argues that "roads leading to the Eliotic metropolis come from Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron and Thomas Lovell Beddoes", as well as from the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley (2011: 200).

Notwithstanding the evidence of Romantic traces in a theory of poetry which is not completely exempt from incoherencies (see Easthope 1983: 137), it is well-known that T. S. Eliot, as the epitome of the art-for-art's-sake avant-gardism, was in deep revolt against nineteenth-century poetry and its cultural legacy. If, as Thomas Parkinson suggests (1958: 374-75), we read the above-quoted passage against the backdrop of early twentieth-century criticism of *mimetic* or *expressive* conceptions of art in favour of approaches which stress the component of "artefact", what emerges is an anti-Romantic interpretation: i.e. art divorced from any moral, didactic, referential or social function. As Eliot wrote in "Tradition and The Individual Talent", "the difference between art and the event is always absolute", (1920: 50). In his perspective, the transparency of the poetic words is connected, paradoxically, not to the Romantic idea that a subject may appear "fully present to itself in a signified without a signifier, a represented without means of representation" (Easthope 1983:

123), but rather to the dominance of signification over signified. Just as music may be appreciated in terms of sounds, intensities, rhythms, and harmonies, poetry may be appreciated as words arranged in a rhythmic order, characterized by a concentration of figures of sounds as well as images, symbols, metaphors, patterns of words, and so on. In this perspective, Eliot's words reveal major points of agreement with early twentieth-century aesthetic theories stressing the means of expression, rather than an artwork's fidelity to nature or the poet's truest and inner self (or capacity to transcend it). Consequently, they go in the same direction as Henri Matisse's entreaty for an art independent of subject matters ("What I dream of is an art of equilibrium, purity, and tranquility, without disquieting or disturbing subjects, which could be for the mental worker, the business man, and the man of letters too, for example, a mental refreshment and relaxation, something analogous to a good easy chair in which one rests from his physical", quoted in Parkinson 1958: 374). Also, T. S. Eliot's and Matisse's points show a continuity with Ezra Pound's argument that "[t]he painters realise that what matters is form and colour. Musicians long ago learned that programme music was not the ultimate music. Almost anyone can realize that to use a symbol with an ascribed or intended meaning is, usually, to produce a very bad art" (1983: 134).

Whether addressed from a post-Romantic or Counter-Romantic perspective, Eliot's concept of transparency is deeply rooted in a conundrum of which the poet himself was well aware: "We never succeeded [to get beyond poetry], but Lawrence's words mean this to me, that they express to me what the forty or fifty original lines that I have written strive towards" (Eliot 2015: 894). Transparency of language remains an unreachable ideal both if we grant poetic words the power of transcending themselves, or if signifiers are given the licence to 'float' in their own autonomy. As rooted in a material process of enunciation, language constantly points to the opacity of communicative exchanges which take place through it. It is within its nature as a trans-personal, shared, material medium to be ingrained in social interactions, human relations, and external references. By this token, an analysis of the opening lines of Eliot's

"Portrait of a Lady" ("You have the scene arrange itself, as it will seem to do [...]") shows that words are not simply arranged in a rhythmic order, and neither may images and figures of speech just be treated as "poet's pigment" without caring about being or not being "representative", as Pound suggested (1983: 134). The assonance of the words "scene" and "seem", which is supposed to give readers an immediate pleasure in their discrimination of repeated patterns (see Patterson 1958: 378), does not simply rely on their internal frame of reference, but points to an outside – to a moral reading which corroborates the aesthetic reading of the poem. Language refers to emotional and intellectual associations, as well as to a complex reality in which it mediates, interposes, falsifies and may become part of an opaque game of "pretenses" – as those put on by the very Lady which Eliot represents in the poem.

The unbridgeable discrepancy between a modernist theory of poetry and its practice – i.e. the fact that poetry cannot leave out the external dimensions of language, those aspects that are referential, relational, moral, political, social – is at the very heart of Carol Ann Duffy's own poetic endeavour. A profound admirer of T. S. Eliot and his modernist poetics, the former Poet Laureate (2009-2019) places a continual acknowledgement and exploration of the limits of language at the center of her compositions. Writing from the cultural context of late capitalism, multinationals, and mass communication, she translates Eliot's preoccupation with transparency into a postmodern language which entails, to quote Jameson's well-known phrasings, "aesthetic populism" (1984: 54), "deconstruction of expression" (ivi: 57), "the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (ivi: 63) and "imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (ivi: 65). Duffy's poetic forms, despite their apparent adherence to poetic conventions, referentiality, and everyday language address the constructedness and indeterminacy of the linguistic medium, thus undertaking a process of demystification, decontextualization, fragmentation and interrogation of the relationship of experience and linguistic structures. As Michael Woods puts it, [i]t is significant that a poet with such felicity at the medium

of the art itself should have at the centre of her poetics an acute sense of an ever-present tautology predicated upon what amounts to a post-structuralist awareness of the unstable nature of the sign" (2003: 169).

This essay aims to argue that it is precisely the cultural conundrum of poetry and transparency addressed by T. S. Eliot in the above-quoted extract which becomes a site of Duffy's poetic and critical exploration. Transparency figures prominently in Duffy's poem as a central theme, and also, as the following paragraphs will show, as the object of poetic performance. Her poems, nonetheless, exploit the very idea of transparency in a subversive way. What Duffy accomplishes is neither a search for a poetry which is "essentially poetry", as advocated by Eliot in the short extract quoted above, nor an attempt to be included in an idealized, exclusive (i.e. Western, male) Tradition with a capital "T". On the contrary, Duffy perverts the very idea of "Tradition" and promotes a poetry which may actually be "popular" and "democratic" because of its use of a language which pretends to be "transparent" because of the way it ostentatiously adheres to the language spoken by people in their everyday life. Nevertheless, her poems manipulate clichés, conventions, commonplaces and references to popular culture to undertake a critical process which undermines the very concepts of communicability, clarity and transparency. Duffy operates a fusion between poetry and philosophy which requires the reader to develop critical and intellectual awareness of the mediations operated by language, and of language as a site of alterity. The more a poetic utterance strives to be transparent, i.e. as Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it, to make itself "invisible" (2006: 64), the more it emerges as a compromise between what speakers want to say and what the shared language we speak allows them to say. Duffy follows an opposite path from the one described by her literary predecessor: while Eliot claims to work through artificiality in order to reach the "essence" of poetry, she digs through the apparent naturalness of everyday language to unveil its opacity. The influence of the author of "The Waste Land" on her work has been addressed in a variety of studies (Gregson 1996; Michelis, Rowland 2003; Rowland 2003; Roberts 2003; Garba 2006) which highlight

the central role that Eliot's idea of poetry as an impersonal medium has played in the artistic development of the former Poet Laureate. A most evident continuity between Duffy and Eliot encompasses the capacity of going beyond the egotism of lyric poetry by transcending the "lyric I" and giving voice to *dramatis personae* - J. Alfred Prufrock, of course, but also the many characters at the margins of society which inhabit Duffy's poems: lunatics, prostitutes, amnesiacs, murderers and so on.

Moreover, Duffy's use of the dramatic monologue is consistent with Eliot's view that artists have to extinguish their own personality in order to go beyond their individual selves - "[w]hat happens to the artist is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable" (Eliot 1920: 52-53), i.e. of course, art and tradition. Also, as Eliot claims, "[t]he poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (ivi: 56).

What is even more interesting, nevertheless, is the way Duffy manipulates Eliot's conception of emotions and feelings. As is commonly known, Eliot considered the former to belong to personality and to life ("to the man who suffers", ivi: 48), and the latter to be inherent to art, "to the mind which creates", which the more separated it is from experience, the more artistically creative it may be. As Easthope puts it, "Eliot's account denies that emotions can be directly expressed: art is at best 'correlative' to emotion, and then only because the emotion can be represented by a 'formula', a 'set of objects'. In poetry these objects are signifiers, thus acknowledged as having a weight and materiality of their own" (1983: 137). In Carol Ann Duffy's poetry we can also find a similar concreteness of presentation, autonomy of the objects, and desire to represent emotions not through introspections but rather through what Eliot called "objective correlative": "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot 1920: 92). These formulas, in Duffy's poetry are the product of the

defamiliarization of clichés, cultural references, literary and extra-literary discourses. The artistic skill of the poet consists in evoking experiences that readers may share in a language which is familiar to them, and then transforming these experiences into something else - perfectly arranged artefacts in which dialogic and dialectic mechanisms alienate and counterbalance the apparent transparency of expression, i.e. of the way people actually speak in real life and of their cultural references.

### **"The secret of poems": transparency as elusiveness**

Memory's caged bird won't fly. These days  
we are adjectives, nouns. In moments of grace  
we were verbs, the secret of poems, talented.  
A thin skin lies on the language. We stare  
deep in the eyes of strangers, look for the doing words.  
("Moments of Grace", lines 16-20)

Taken from Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Moments of Grace" (*Mean Time*, 1993), the above-quoted stanza seems to express a continuity of concerns with T. S. Eliot's passage on poetry and transparency. In both texts, what emerges is a "yearning for", a dialectic tension which never reaches the wished-for, (post-)Romantic unity of words and world. What Eliot called "poetry standing naked in its bare bones" (2015: 894) echoes in Duffy's reference to "the secret of poems" (l.18). "Moments of Grace" inscribes the possibility that words may actually be "transparent" into a past lost forever and thus unreachable, forever locked in a person's mind ("memory's caged bird won't fly"); by doing so she constructs what the Russian artist and scholar Svetlana Boym called "reflective nostalgia", i.e. a nostalgia concerned with "historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" (2001: 49). It is, in other words, a nostalgia that deliberately suspends and defers, dwelling more on the process of longing than on the possibility that the longed-for may be or have been really actualized. As it forces us to reflect on the processes through which the idealization of reality is constituted, rather than on the real possibility of reality coinciding with the image of

plenitude represented by the idealized past of nostalgia, reflective nostalgia proves that “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgement or critical reflection” (ivi: 49-50).

The stanza stands out against the first three stanzas in which the poetic voice is constructed as the enunciation of a singular, first person speaker, and the last stanza, in which a “you” – the speaker’s lover – is constructed as the ideal reader of the poem. In the other stanzas, the speaking voice articulates a first-person narrative in which memory of what are presented as “moments of grace” emerges as something deeply personal – the Wordsworthian ideal of the perfect identification of the internal with the external, the subject and the world (“I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature”, W. Wordsworth, quoted in Easthope 1983: 123) – to which the speaking voice seems to commit. Here, instead, the deictic “we” emerges as an undefined collective subject, who does not only encompass the actants in the poem but may also be making general statements on the nature of language. “A thin skin lies on language. We stare/ deep in the eyes of stranger, look for the doing words”: the present tense in these lines highlights the gap between an idealized, unreachable past in which language was transparent, and a present, unavoidable awareness of the discrepancy between representation and represented. As Kinnahan observes, in Duffy’s poetry “we are always reminded that the poem, even when translating experience for us, is words” (1996: 147); Duffy constantly reminds us that the signified eludes its signifier, and that the meaning of words is not ontological – on the contrary, it always point to something, or someone, “other”: the distance, deferral, and alterity which are a constitutive part of the communicative exchange. The “doing words” which cannot be found are to be looked for “in the eyes of strangers” precisely because meanings are constructed through an interaction which is, also, a form of estrangement.

Carol Ann Duffy’s choice of the dramatic monologue as a privileged poetic subgenre concerns precisely her search for the “doing

words”, i.e. for the acts of linguistic performance and actualization of meanings through which living bodies become social actors. We become who we are by committing to certain ways of speaking, by taking a position within the language we speak. The mediation of language is actually the very site of identity. In this perspective the dramatic monologue is a genre which allows us to explore the interposed presence of language in a confessional poetic narrative, in which a speaking voice comes into being through a deeply ambiguous voice. It has been observed that dramatic monologues are not monological at all, as they can be read as the sign of a “divided consciousness” (see: Sinfield 1977: 25; Byron 2003: 15). In dramatic monologues, as a matter of fact, duplicity comes into being as a form of unsolved tensions between the self and the world. Readers are encouraged to adopt both the internal perspective of the narrating character, and an externalized perspective which focuses on the linguistic, social and philosophical context in which the utterance has been produced. By considering the speaking voice simultaneously as subject of the utterances and “subjected” to language, to the cultural systems in which it has come into being, or even to the implicitly different perspective of the (implied) author and/ or readers, dramatic monologues allow readers to explore the characters’ subjectivity both as a psychological condition and as a construct. The *subject* of the utterance may be thus transformed into an *object* of critique, in ways which make “intentionality a much wider and more complex affair and [...] include the contradictions and uncontrolled nature of language within the text’s project” (Armstrong 1993: 10). As a consequence, poetic dialogism is a form of “internal conflict,” created by the profound ambiguity of the poetic utterance. The epistemological and hermeneutic problems that are built in the poetic form open up “an exploration of the unstable entities of the self and world and the simultaneous problems of representation and interpretation, but because it is founded on debated and contest” (ivi: 13-14).

Duffy’s poem “Psychopath” exemplifies the poet’s capacity to include different layers of alterity within the poetic utterance precisely. The speaking voice in the monologue is a rapist and murderer animated with a desire to communicate his delusions of grandeur. The

subject-matter of his narrative, as Ian Gregson puts it, is “‘shockingly’ unpoetic [...] The juxtapositions [...] – sex, gratuitous cruelty, excrement – suggest that what is being evoked is well beyond the literary pale, the articulation of the inarticulate, a naturalistic exploration of how a low life normally unheeded by those who read poetry, the authentic voice of the eponymous psychopath” (1996: 97). Readers cannot be but startled by the contrast between Duffy’s reputation as a feminist, lesbian poet, and the way she gives voice to toxic models of masculinity through the perspective of a misogynistic maniac who beats, rapes and kills women, and treats them as objects of pleasure. Yet, the gap between authorial and narrative voice is functional to her critique of “transparency”. Duffy’s depiction of the psychopath’s delirium translates his search for clarity and communicability – epitomized by his utterance “Let me make myself crystal” (5) – into a series of linguistic commonplaces, references to pop culture (music, film, fashion) and quotes. Yet the poem manipulates these very clichés to create a sense of alienation and disorientation in readers, who are presented with the experience of a marginalized character – an “Other” towards whom sympathy is impossible, and yet whose identity comes into being through a variety of clichés which readers will easily recognize as part of their own experience.

“Psychopath” begins as a confession in front of a mirror, enacting a sort of Chinese Box game: the reader is watching a speaker watching himself, and attempting to translate his vision into words. His verbal translation, in fact, gives an illuminative liveliness to the images he is seeing in front of him, and, according to the literary tradition of *ekphrasis*, does not only describe what he is seeing, but also tells the story of the image itself, mixing present and fragments of past memories.

I run my metal comb through the D.A. and pose  
 My reflection between dummies in the window at Burton’s.  
 Lamp light. Jimmy Dean. All over town, ducking and diving,  
 My shoes scud spark against the night. She is in the canal.  
 Let me make myself crystal. With a good-looking girl crackling  
 In four petticoats you feel like a king. She rode past me  
 On a wooden horse, laughing, and the air sang *Johnny*

*Remember me.* I turned the world faster, flash.  
 (“Psychopath”, lines 1-8)

The figure of the psychopath who muses upon his reflection in a shop window as he combs his slicked back hair (“I run my metal comb through the D.A. and pose/ my reflections between dummies in the window at Burton’s”, lines 1-2) is reminiscent of a variety of other characters in Duffy’s monologues whose narrative is prompted by an imperfect mirroring. In the collection *Selling Manhattan*, the speaker’s alienation from his/her reflected or projected image appears in “Sanctuary” (“Later your shadow/ precedes you in the chamber of dreams [...], lines 25-26), “Recognition” (I had to rush out,/ blind in a hot flush, and bumped/ into an anxious, dowdy matron/ who touched the cold mirror/ and stared at me. Stared/ and said I’m sorry sorry sorry”, lines 27-32), “Warming her Pearls” (“In her looking glass, / my red lip part as if I want to speak”, lines 15-16). Also, in “Standing Female Nude” (from the collection *Standing Female Nude*, 1985) the protagonist is a model who does not recognize herself in the portrait which an artist has been painting of her; in “Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941” (*SFN*), an amnesiac looks at other people’s face and sees their contempt of her (“Christ, she’s a rum one”, line 2), and in “Small Female Skull” (*Mean Time*, 1993) the speaker claims to be holding a duplicate of her skull in her hand. The imperfect surfaces onto which the speaker’s image is projected, instead of returning a mimetic representation, reverse the process through which the Lacanian subject-in-the-making constitutes the core of its identity through an identification with its projected image. The speakers’ ephemeral *Gestalt* – i.e., the way they perceive their body as a totality in way which, as Lacan explains, “is more constitutive than constituted” (2002: 4) – is fragmented, diffracted and multiplied. The mirroring thus simultaneously becomes both a moment of self-awareness and of alienation: what the speaker is watching is not just the image of his/her own self, but also a form of alienation and non-recognition.

The phrase “I’ll make myself crystal” links the visual and the verbal in a most interesting way. The ellipsis of the word “clear” in the psychopath’s utterance “Let me make myself crystal” hints to the

defective reflection that he is watching. The mirror is of course, not a mirror, but the glass of the window of a well-known men's clothing brand – a transparent medium which provides the psychopath with the possibility of projecting his image (“pose/ my reflection”) onto a partially reflecting surface. The two properties of “transparency” and “reflexivity” with which the glass is endowed interfere with each other, making actual “clarity” physically impossible. Linguistically, the deceptive “clarity” of the glass surface is rendered through a simple syntax with very short, paratactic sentences. Yet, if observed more carefully, several sentences are actually minor sentences deprived of a subject-predicate structure which may organize meaning and establish logical connections. Fragments of thoughts, incomplete utterances, sentences or clauses like “Lamp light”, “Jimmy Dean” or “flash” do not simply create a conversational effect, help emphasise a point or create drama, but they leave syntactic and semantic connections ambiguous.

The psychopath's making himself “crystal” implies that, by projecting his image onto the glass, he is taking an imaginary place among the dummies on display, and he is symbolically becoming like the empty simulacra – fetishes of a mercified masculinity – which he is seeing in front of himself by virtue of the imperfect transparency and reflexivity of the glass. Similarly, his verbal “confession” may be read as an attempt to project the self onto a discursive surface. Accordingly, the clichés he is using (i.e., the references to concepts and words which he expects the reader to recognize immediately, such as his hairstyle, which he mentions simply with an acronym, the reference to celebrities, the song, commonplace expressions such as “you feel like a king”, etc.) are like the dummies: signifiers conveying the illusion of his being part of an imaginary community which shares the same values as him. Deryn Rees-Jones highlights the “masquerade” component in this representation, arguing that the psychopath “exhibit [...] an extreme gullibility with patriarchal constructs of masculinity” (2001: 21). His posing as the heroes of Hollywood films – James Dean, Marlon Brando, Elvis, Humphrey Bogart – is read as a display of masculinity, i.e. as an exhibition of the objectification of a state of selfhood which has absorbed models and clichés from out-

side. Antony Rowland (2003 and 2003a), instead, places more emphasis on the fact that, while the psychopath is caught in a variety of models of masculinity, his relationship to them is far more complex, as it entails not just identification but rather a profound alienation. The poem, he claims, “should not be read as a direct exposition of ‘normative’ masculinity”, even though “a critique is implicit” (2003: 66) in the depiction of in the spiraling of events in which the speaker is in turn victim (as a child, i.e., in his past) and perpetrator (in the present). What Duffy is representing is a speaker who, by trying to enact a series of contradictory models of masculinities becomes first hysterical, and then, in the last stage of his alienation, simply psychotic. Psychosis is strongly affirmed towards the end of the poem, in the lines 56-57 (“My reflection sucks a sour Woodbine and buys me a drink. Here's/ Looking at you [...]”), in which the speaker seems unable to recognize his own image.

## Conclusions

The game of reflection and transparency which the psychopath plays throughout the poem finds a sharp contrast in the repeated reference to the canal in which the speaker disposed of the body of his victim, which in line 41 is described as “dull”: “Too late. I eased her down by the dull canal”. Gregson notes how “the phrase ‘dull canal’, with its echo of *The Waste Land*, draws attention to a poetic voice speaking alongside the psychopathic one” (1996: 97). Besides that, “dull” refers to a surface which does neither reflect nor allow light to pass through. Death is the cessation of the psychopath game of transparency and reflection, the abrupt end of his game of (missed) identification.

While conflicting considerations regarding the moral side of Duffy's poem have been produced by different critics, reading the poem from the angle of its critique of transparency allows it to be interpreted as a poem concerned with life and death, as well as a profound meditation on self and other. Most “moral” critiques explore the wide spectrum of the possible interpretation of a text which, on the one hand, depicts a disruptive, deeply unsettling Otherness,



and on the other hand, express the desire of this “Other” to be acknowledged. Critics have addressed questions regarding the way that Duffy, in her poem, unsettles moral judgement by allowing a predatory male to tell his story through a dramatic monologue. The conventions of the genre, of course, allow the speaker to tell his own story, and to elicit sympathy from the reader by describing the trauma of his childhood (Rees-Jones 2001) or by presenting him as a psychotic victim of patriarchy (Rowland 2003a). The poem has concurrently been addressed as a satire of masculinity (ibidem), and as a multi-voiced work, in which the reader perceives Carol Ann Duffy’s feminist voice against the grain of the psychopath’s utterances, thus creating a dialogism between two conflicting perspectives which may be read in terms of a feminist parody of the masculine gaze (Gregson 1996: 99-100). While all the differing interpretations do not necessarily contradict but rather complement each other, a critique of transparency may add a new piece to the puzzle. What unsettles us readers is not only the depiction of violence or the request for sympathy, but also the very fact that we are participating in the same language game as the psychopath. Like him, we are able to access our identity and communicate it through an imperfect game of transparency and reflexivity. The complete opacity of the “dull canal” is the opacity of death, of what remains outside language and representation.

As suggested in the passage from T. S. Eliot which introduced this essay, Duffy’s poetry allows us to see something that goes “beyond poetry”, and also beyond words. That something is the unspeakable experience of death, which eludes language and communication. What transcends language, in “Psychopath”, is not transparency, but the opacity of the “dull canal”, beyond which is a wall of silence and darkness. The ultimate “Other” of the poem is not the psychopath, but rather the girl “eased” into the dull canal, who cannot play alongside the speaker in his game of imperfect mirroring. Unlike Eliot’s imperfect transparency, Duffy’s does not lead to artistic purity or to “poetry standing naked in its bare bones”, but rather to an exploration of the superficiality of linguistic structure, and to a sense of unescapable alienation and disorientation.

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