A Kristevan Reading of Carol Ann Duffy’s
“The Grammar of Light”

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I. Introduction
When Carol Ann Duffy was appointed Britain’s poet laureate in May, 2009, Jeanette Winterson wrote a commentary for The Times, entitled “Poetic Justice: a gay woman is the people’s choice”, in which she describes Duffy as “a role model for older women, creative women, successful women and aspiring women. This ends the male domination of poetry and it buries any lingering doubts about women’s creativity somehow not being quite up to the male mark”. [1] To be the first woman, the first Scot and the first lesbian holding the post of poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy is indisputably unprecedented. Born in Glasgow in 1955, Duffy moved to Statford at the age of six. She was brought up in a traditional working-class Roman Catholic family, so many of her poems are biblically allusive and reflect a
rejection of rigid Catholic practices. Her father was a Labor Councilor in Statford, who undoubtedly gave Duffy an early insight into political matters, which she maintains interests in her writing. Once talking about her life and writing career, she said, “I was brought up in a girls’ school to be a nice girl, and then a nice woman. 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.”[2] So some of her works attempt to identify with women’s experience. Rather than being interested in the individual case, she looks to voice collective feelings about the way women relate to men, and in this relationship, men are always at the expense of ironies and jokes. She studied in Liverpool University from 1974 to 1979, where she develops interests in language philosophy. As a result, the depth of her poetry lies in her capacity in encompassing a broad range of themes like religion, politics, memory, the effects of time, love, relationships, sexuality, the marginalizing of women, and the inadequacy of language. In incorporating these matters of complexity into her poems, she borrows the commonality of everyday experience, and engages it with the philosophical thinking.

Duffy established her fame as a poet in 1985 with the publication of her first collection, Standing Female Nude, which won the Scottish Arts Council Book Award in 1986, Somerset Maugham Award in 1988 and the Dylan Thomas Award in 1989. Since then, her popularity kept growing as she won many important poetry awards and prizes with her later collections, Selling Manhattan (1987), The Other Country (1990), Mean Time (1993), The World’s Wife (1999), Feminine Gospels (2002), Rapture (2005), among many others.

II. Duffy and Language

Language is one of the important concerns in Duffy’s poetry. Her undergraduate interests in Wittgenstein are led into her poetic experiment of language. Her concern about language lies in the problems language presents as a system of signification, just as Michael J. Woods stated that “Duffy frequently draws attention to its [language’s] inability to convey what human beings wish to convey.”[3] 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.\textsuperscript{4}

Such an aesthetic also underlies her poetic advocacy. Once interviewed by Jeanette Winterson, Duffy said,

I feel, like Beckett, that all poetry is prayer. So where does that sit poetry in the twenty first century, in this confusing and bloody world of ours? I've been thinking about that. 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 narrative. I'm not dealing with facts, I'm dealing with emotion.\textsuperscript{5}

Duffy seems dissatisfied with what words and narrative can denote and she tends to differentiate her language from that of the "Male novelists and dramatists" for being emotional. Such an emphasis on experience and emotion more than narrative corresponds to what Julia Kristeva proposes in her \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language} that meaning does not lie in grammar, syntax or vocabulary, but is readable largely on the basis of the "poetic and affective aspects of texts".\textsuperscript{6} Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst and feminist, whose works are of important place in post-structuralist thought. She treats language as a "dynamic signifying process". Though she does not explicitly define this term, Kelly Oliver describes her view this way:

Instead of lamenting what is lost, absent, or impossible in language, Kristeva marvels at this other realm [bodily experience] that makes its way into language. The force of language is [a] living driving force transferred into language. Signification is like a transfusion of the living body into language.\textsuperscript{7}

Kristeva researches on the ways in which bodily drives and energy are expressed through people's use of language, which she calls "affect", or evident emotion.

Both Duffy and Kristeva agree on the view that the signification of poetic language lies in emotion or affect, which makes it possible to interpret Duffy's theme of language on the basis of Kristeva's theory. Consequently, this essay is
intended to analyze Duffy’s “The Grammar of Light” from her fourth collection, *Mean Time*, to explore relationships among language, sensory experience and signifying process, based on Julia Kristeva’s theory of language.

### III. Kristevan Theory

Before the analysis of the poem, I should cover some key points in Kristeva’s theory of language including her notions of the *chora*, the semiotic and the symbolic. Kristeva believes that signifying process operates in two modes. She draws a distinction “between 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), on the one hand, and linguistic signification that is manifested in linguistic signs and their logico-syntactic organization, on the other”.[8] So we know that the semiotic is involved with 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 signifying process and do not necessarily form an opposing dichotomy. In terms of the semiotic representation in poetic language, Anne-Marie Smith concludes that repetitions, rhythms, rhyme, alliteration, intonations, onomatopoeia, tone, modulation of voices, word-play, and tears are all manifestations of Kristeva’s semiotic order, which can be referred to as “affect” in psychoanalysis.[9]

Kristeva is concerned with the relation of sexuality to language, which enables her to bridge linguistics with psychoanalysis. She borrows the term “chora” from Plato’s *Timaeus*, meaning receptacle or space. Plato likens the chora to a maternal space that receives and allows things to flourish, from which Kristeva derives the idea of chora as capable of generating energy. In defining her concept of chora, she writes:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are “energy” charges as well as “psychical” marks, articulate what we call a chora: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated...in this rhythmic space, which has no thesis and no position, the process by which significance is constituted.[10]
Here Kristeva points out that in this psychic space, identity or self-other distinction is not yet forming, so there is no clear border between the infant and the mother. The infant 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. Such a rhythm of motility and regulation contribute to the significance of non-verbal semiotic signification. Therefore we might remember that prior to language acquisition, a baby would express itself with various intonations and babbles as the imitation of the rhythms of its mother’s speech. These babbles might be mere manifestation of the baby’s inner drive in the first hand but after being regulated by the family and social judgment, especially the mother’s, certain intonations will be internalized as an attribution and later prepared for being meaningful. As a result, Kristeva’s chora is more than a space, but a rhythm and is often connotative of the mother’s body for the infantile relationship to its mother provides an orientation for the infant’s drives towards the mother. Since this stage of signification is non-verbal and pre-linguistic, chora is often in conjunction with the semiotic.

In the beginning, the infant, in the embrace of the chora, sees itself as a unity with the mother, the other. Then through certain events, it comes to see itself separate from its surroundings, a process referred to as the “thetic break”, by which the infant becomes ready to use language with metaphoric or metonymic values to express its sense of loss caused by the separation. So the thetic is a crunch, just as Kristeva writes, “we view the thetic phase—the positing of the imago, castration, and the positing of semiotic motility—as the place of the Other, 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”.[11]

In conclusion, the symbolic can be associated with the linguistic and the socialization of the child, while the semiotic can be seen as an articulation of unconscious processes. Both are inseparable conceptual modalities with the semiotic serving as either energizing or subversive forces to the symbolic. All imaginative practice, such as art and poetry, represents such a dialectic relationship, since it articulates the instinctual drives of the subject while submitting them to a “socially admissible code”. Kristeva claims this dialectic as “the very condition of jouissance”. [12]

Though based on Lacan’s model of three interacting orders, the imaginary, the
symbolic and the real, according to Novelle McAfee, Kristeva parts with Lacan in three aspects. Firstly, she places the break between the infant and the mother at an earlier time before the mirror stage, which she calls "abjection", a process the infant begins to reject what it finds unpalatable. Secondly, 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 rhythms of speech, the infant thereby incorporates the mother's pattern of language, and thus enable the infant to communicate with others. Thirdly, while Lacan holds that the imaginary is "a lost territory" and the real is "a void", Kristeva argues that both can be discernible in the semiotic mode of signification. In discovering them, Kristeva introduces the psychical phenomenon of "abjection" and "melancholia", both processes reflecting the pain of being separate from the archaic mother, becoming a subject and ultimately being contained by the symbolic realm.

IV. Analysis of "The Grammar of Light"
Now we can take a look at Duffy's "The Grammar of Light":

The Grammar of Light

Even barely enough light to find a mouth,
And bless both with a meaningless O, teaches,
Spells out. The way 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.

And so many mornings to lean; some
When the day is wrung from damp, grey skies
And rooms come on for breakfast
In the town you are leaving early. The way
A wasteground weeps glass tears at the end of a street.

Some fluent, showing you how the trees
In the square think in birds, telepathies. The way
The waiter balances light in his hands, the coins
In his pocket silver, and a young bell shines
In its white tower ready to tell.

Even a saucer of rain in a garden at evening
Speaks to the eye. Like the little fires
From allotments, undressing in veils of mauve smoke
As you walk home under the muted lamps,
Perplexed. The way the shy stars go stuttering on.

And at midnight, a candle next to the wine
Slurs its soft wax, flatters. Shadows
Circle the table. The way all faces blur
To dreams of themselves held in the eyes.
The flare of another match. The way everything dies.

From the title of the poem, “The Grammar of Light”, we can discern a conceit, with grammar referring to language, the signs we use for communication and articulation, and light referring to the medium that helps us see things, belonged to the sensory experience. Though seemingly unrelated are grammar and light, language and sensory experience are both conceptual modalities, which in Kristeva’s perspective are formal and non-verbal signifying system respectively, in other words, the symbolic and semiotic. Non-verbal as it is, the semiotic has recourse to symbolic coded structures in so far as it is accepted in a cultural framework. Therefore, “The Grammar of Light” can be seen as the representation or verbalization of the non-expressive sensory experience underlying language. In order to present the heterogeneous semiotic at work, the normal rules of syntax and semantics are constantly disrupted in the poem.

In the first stanza, Duffy creates a sense of a dark room as suggested by “barely enough light” and “a curtain opened at night”. Kristeva in her Time and Sense sees “literary activity as a dark-room in which sensory experience can be slowly processed, seen and understood in the wider context of interpersonal experience.”\[15\] As a result, this dark room motif suggests the semiotic chora, a sensory space which is capable of generating the energy that helps fuel the signifying process. In this dark room, people “bless both with a meaningless O”. The alliteration of “h”, a burst of bilabial sound suggests the sensory pleasure of a kiss while the capitalized “O” is the shape of the mouth as they kiss or as they exclaim the pleasure. This “O” might be meaningless in semantic level, but attention to semiotic dimensions enables us to focus upon the significance beyond the literal meaning. So this part is a depiction of the sensuous moment. The semiotic chora presents itself to be a non-verbal, pre-linguistic totality, in which only sounds and gestures are used to
express one's primordial desire.

The first sentence does not form a grammatical sentence. The lack of subject creates an ambiguity of what “teaches, spells out”. It can be the light, though “barely enough”, or the kiss, or “meaningless O”. The indefinite subject contributes to a mysterious quality of the sensory experience. So this stage of signification is more affect-driven than logical. Moreover, the lack of subject and the unidentified people in kiss suggest that in this semiotic chora, subjectivity is not yet forming. “both” even highlights the unity, so there is still no self-other distinction. “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”. Thus the meanings of the polysemy applicable will not produce a simple and uniform meaning. On one hand, the sensory experience teaches people and makes them understand love, so it constructs; on the other hand, it bewitches them under a spell of love, so it destructs. As a result, the semiotic mode of signification is depicted in relation to the bodily drive, which is about to structure and de-structure identity.

Then a curtain is “opened at night/ lets in neon, or moon, or a car’s hasty glance,/ and paints for a moment someone you love”. The scene represents what Lacan calls the mirror stage of development. The infiltration of light which illuminates the room and reflects the other is equivalent to the mirror. The uncertainty of the light source suggests either natural or artificial means. So the unity of the two is split by this reflection as the word “paints” that visualizes the other and highlights the self-other distinction. The separation contributes to an emotional transfixion which is stressed through the forceful word “pierces”, suggesting the penetration of light as well as a momentary feeling of sharp emotion. Kristeva refers this stage to the thetic break, which is necessary for identity forming and later a passage to language even though it will raise fear or anxiety. The failure to internalize this break may engender psychosis. Therefore different experiences are described in the second and third stanza.

Now the subject-to-be is about to identify its border; hence stanza two begins with “so many mornings to lean”. Here Duffy posits an ambiguity with “mornings” as time in which to learn about the world or as the target for leaning, since different light effects in different mornings will produce different sensory impression. At this threshold to language, some experience is unpleasant, as in the second stanza, it writes, “the day is wrung from damp, grey skies”. This line alludes to the
Genesis: 14 in which God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night”. As Freud deemed women “the dark continent”, the night is associated to the feminine chora. The separation of the day from the night suggests the thetic break. But the word “wrung” hints a sense of reluctance as the separation is done by force, or by the intervening of the symbolic Father. Then the poem presents to us a faintly miserable picture with someone leaving a town early. The emphasis on the room and breakfast suggests a B&B, not a home. If the first stanza reflects a state of satisfaction, then here the second stanza the un-home-like, in Freudian term, “das Unheimliche”. According to Kristeva, the feeling of being un-home-like conjures up a memory of the self in the maternal chora. Such a memory is an affliction termed “maternal abjection”, since unconsciously, one longs to fall back into the maternal chora for comfort and self-satisfaction; however, the regression also means an anxiety of losing one’s subjectivity. This frustration leads to a state of disconsolation as shown in the personification of the raining scene, “a wasteground weeps glass tears at the end of a street”.

The third stanza is contrary to the second in feeling, as the experience is more successful, indicated by “fluent”. The trees thinking in birds might be against the logical signification, but the “meaningless O” has already told us to bypass the semantic meaning and focus on the significance; hence we must “telepathise”. I understand “telepahise” as a transference by which significance is worked out through moving beyond the formal signifying system and connecting it to something outside it. Based on this concept, the bird image can be alluded to the Socratic metaphor of ideas, since in Theaetetus, Socrates compares the human mind to a birdcage and ideas or knowledge to birds. So “think in birds” connects signifier (sound-image: bird) and signified (meaning: idea or thinking).

Such transference reminds me of Lacan’s insight in seeing metaphors as evidence of condensation when a symbol represents one or more things, and metonyms as evidence of displacement when a symbol takes the place of something else. Thus, we can see effects of the unconscious in language. Such insight prompts Kristeva to see that before being contained by the symbolic, the thetic break will first of all give rise to a semiotic fragment with metaphoric or metonymic value. So the following description in the third stanza is more literary than logical by employing some intended verbal felicity through different types of metaphors and metonyms. The “light” in the waiter’s hands is a metonym of the tray, as a tray can...
radiate light. It is through transferred epithet, a kind of displacement of modifier, that the coin can be seen silver in the pocket. And the bell being “young” and “ready to tell” is because of personification, an ontological metaphor giving human quality to things. The metaphoric and metonymic features of the verse suggests that the subject-to-be has gone through the thetic break and cleared the way for the threshold of language, as it can insert its semiotic affects into language and symbolization.

By using “even” in the fourth stanza, the tone is intended to negate. “a saucer of rain in a garden at evening/ speaks to the eye” connects seeing to speaking, or image to word. Here the sight of the rain reminds us of the disconsolation presented in the raining scene in the second stanza, so the tone of negation tells us that even such depression will benefit a person’s signifying process and direct towards speech. Contrast to the leaving-home motif, the following description represents a back-home motif, although the atmosphere is permeated with silence and anxiety, as shown in “muted lamps” and “perplexed”. However, optimism is shown faintly in the image of fires “undressing in veils of mauve smoke” and “shy stars go stuttering on”.

One of Kristeva’s famous hypotheses is narcissistic depression, or melancholia, which points to the importance of the mother played 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 narcissist, who sees the loss as an unnamable thing, or “a light without representation”. Kristeva posits this unnamable thing as Lacanian “the real”, which resists articulation. Therefore, the melancholic barely speaks, because there is no word to signify his/her sadness. So we can see the point for muteness in the poem and hence the back-home motif as a representation of the cure for such depression. But before going back home, the melancholic must be revealed where the home is, or what is “the real”, through, for example, psychoanalysis. Such a process is like unveiling the fire. Yet as the aforementioned “das Unheimliche”, the regression can also cause anxiety of losing one’s subjectivity and falling back into a state, according to Kristeva, akin to what Freud called the death drive. So the back-home motif is a depiction of ambivalence, indicated by “perplexed”.

Then if the melancholic is so depressed and resists articulation, how could he/she venture out the muteness into speech? Kristeva says that he/she might reconcile the loss of the mother through “primary identification” with the “father in individual
prehistory”. This imaginary father is not Lacanian stem symbolic Father who threatens with castration, but according to Kelly Oliver, a “father-mother conglomerate”, as transference between a semiotic mother and an ideal and kind symbolic father. So the imaginary father is the signified meaning of mother. In the poem, “the shy stars” becomes the metaphor for the imaginary father, since the twinkling of the stars is powered by the solar energy, a paternal metaphor. Consequently, by identifying with the signified meaning of mother in replace of the sound-image mother, the subject completes its separation from the enigmatic sense of loss, identifies with the symbolic order, and ultimately settles in the realm of language.

After the diurnal process of light, the poem descends in the last stanza into midnight when “a candle next to the wine/ slurs its soft wax, flatters”. Seeing and speaking are once again perfectly overlapping here with the witty use of “slurs” and “flatters”. “Slur” refers to the melting and sliding of the wax as the candle burns, but at the same time hints the drunken speech, which is highlighted by “flatters”. The irrational drive represented by “wine” becomes the affect to energize the speech. After a momentary sense of speech, the tone of the poem turns back to silence and a sense of death. “Shadows circle the table” reflects the elapse of time, indicating the candle’s burning out and the encroaching darkness. The blurring faces in dreams present a sense of falling into the unconscious. Even “The flare of another match” is the metaphor of the brevity of life. The circularity in encroaching shadow, dreams held in eyes and the halo of the flaring match corresponds to the “meaningless O” in the beginning of the poem. As a result, “the way everything dies” corresponds to the death drive, akin to the regression to an archaic maternal state. After presenting the signifying process from the semiotic to the symbolic, the poem draws a conclusion to a return to the beginning in forming a circle. This reiterates what Kristeva believes that the mother is the ultimate signifier, a place for the condensation or displacement of semiotic affects, so the semiotic underlies the symbolic and hence allows us to elaborate the real, the meaning, or the significance.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, Duffy deliberately employs the terms of linguistics and visual experience to construct her imaginary grammar of light. In corresponding to this subversive grammar, she disrupts the syntax in the poem by writing fragmentary sentences and positing ambiguous referents. The repetition of “the way” in every
stanza draws the attention that one must not look at the semantic meaning of the lines but beyond and outside the text to connect it to sensory experience. Thus this practice makes the reading on the basis of Kristevan theory possible. Kristeva's advocacy of the semiotic focuses upon the non-verbal aspects of the signifying process. By linking linguistics with psychoanalysis, she sees the maternal space, the source of the bodily drives, as the nocturnal power to facilitate the signifying process. Duffy's "The Grammar of Light" is an expression of this link between language and the realm of the psycho-somatic as well as a representation of the semiotic mode of signification.

Notes:
[1] Jeanette Winterson. "Poetic Justice: a gay woman is the people's choice," The Times. May 2nd, 2009. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article6206887.ece>
[2] Jane Dowson, Alice Entwistle. A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 190.
[3] Michael J. Woods. Yorknotes Carol Ann Duffy Selected Poems. Revised ed., London: York Press, 2005: 7.
[4] Rees-Jones, Deryn. Carol Ann Duffy. 2nd revised ed., Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2001: 14.
[5] Carol Ann Duffy. "Interview with Jeanette Winterson. 'It's not facts, it's emotion'," The Times. September 3rd, 2005. <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article561469.ece>
[6] Noëlle McAfee. Julia Kristeva. New York & London: Routledge, 2004: 14.
[7] Kelly Oliver. ed. Introduction, The Portable Kristeva. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997: xx.
[8] Julia Kristeva. New Maladies of the Soul. tran. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995: 104
[9] Anne-Marie Smith.
[10] Julia Kristeva. Revolution in Poetic Language. tran. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984: 25-6.
[11] Ibid, 48.
[12] Quoted and translated in Anne-Marie Smith. Julia Kristeva—Speaking the Unspeakable. London: Pluto Press, 1998: 22.
[13] Noëlle McAfee. *Julia Kristeva*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004: 35-7.

[14] Carol Ann Duffy. *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin, 1994: 113-4.

[15] Anne-Marie Smith. *Julia Kristeva—Speaking the Unspeakable*. London: Pluto Press, 1998: 28.

[16] Julia Kristeva. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. tran. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984: 60.

[17] Herbert G. May, Bruce M. Metzger. ed., *The Oxford Annotated Bible*. Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962: 2.

[18] Noëlle McAfee. *Julia Kristeva*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004: 48-9.

[19] Plato. *Theaetetus*. tran. John McDowell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973: 199a.

[20] Julia Kristeva. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. tran. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989: 13.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Kelly Oliver. “Kristeva’s Imaginary Father and the Crisis in Paternal Function,” *Diacritics*. Vol. 21, No. 2/3: A Feminist Miscellany. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. Summer-Autumn: 43-63.

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