

Space and the Undecidable in Selected Poems

by Carol Ann Duffy^(*)

Under the Supervision

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Abstract

This research paper explores the interplay between space and voice in some selected poems by Carol Ann Duffy. Though voice in Duffy's poetry has been extensively examined before, it is the intertwinement between space and voice that is underread. Through the use of an array of poetic devices, Duffy creates a distinct type of space. This space intriguingly becomes a site for both absence and presence, allowing for a multiplicity of meanings to emerge. The inscrutable nature of the space discovered in the selected poems leads to uncertainty in fully comprehending and/or defining its implications; which is why it calls for being deconstructed in order to read the multi-layered meanings. This study makes use of Jacques Derrida's concept of undecidability or the undecidable so that it can fathom the intersection between space and voice in Duffy's poems. It connects this intriguing spatial configuration to agency and/or the lack of it.

Keywords: space, deconstruction, undecidability, Carol Ann Duffy, voice, agency

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الملخص

هذا البحث يستكشف التفاعل بين المكان والصوت في بعض القصائد المختارة لكارول آن دافي. وعلى الرغم من أن الصوت في شعر دافي قد تم تناوله نقدياً بشكل موسع من قبل، فإن الترابط بين المكان والصوت هو ما لم يقرأ أو يحلل بشكل كافٍ. من خلال استخدام مجموعة من الأدوات الشعرية، تخلق دافي مكاناً من نوع خاص. يصبح هذا المكان بشكل مثير للاهتمام موقعا لكل من الغياب والحضور، مما يسمح بظهور تعددية المعنى. إن الطبيعة الغامضة للمكان المكتشف في القصائد المختارة تؤدي إلى عدم اليقين في فهم أو تعريف تداعياته بالكامل؛ وهذا هو السبب في أنه يتطلب التفكيك لقراءة المعاني متعددة الطبقات. تستخدم هذه الدراسة مفهوم جاك دريدا عن "اللاتقريرية" حتى تتمكن من فهم تقاطع المكان والصوت في قصائد دافي. وترتبط هذه التكوينات المكانية بوجود الوكالة و/أو نقصها..

الكلمات المفتاحية: المكان، التفكيكية، اللاتقريرية، كارول آن دافي، الصوت،

الفاعلية

“Poetry, like love, depends on a kind of recognition. So often with Duffy does the reader say, “Yes, that’s it exactly” (O’Brien qtd. in Scottish Poetry Library). It is not unusual to read such an opinion of Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry in most of the reviews written about her. The familiarity of her diction and tone have paved the way for her poems to be widely read, critically acclaimed, and to that acknowledged “recognition” among her readers as the above quotation mentions. However, this sense of familiarity carries multi-layered significance and dense meanings that Duffy loads her poems with.

The first official holder of the position of a Poet Laureate in

England was John Dryden in 1668. Since that year until 2009, the post was held by men. In 2009, Carol Ann Duffy (1955 – present) became the first woman to hold the post. She was going to be chosen in 1999 to succeed Ted Hughes; however, she lost it to Andrew Motion who says of her poetry: "I have a particular fondness for her early books...There was a mixture of direct address and something slightly surreal, fanciful, tender-hearted and whimsical" (Qtd. in Forbes). Duffy was born in Glasgow in 1955. She attended Stafford Girls' High then studied in the University of Liverpool, obtaining a degree of Philosophy in 1977. She rose to fame after publishing her first poetry collection *Standing Female Nude* in 1985. Since that year and till the present moment, Duffy has been a prolific and active poet, writing for both children and adults. "Along with other poets of her generation, her work has been set for examinations in schools throughout Britain, and a group of these poets have regularly read their poems to huge audiences of GCSE students as part of the 'Poetry Live' sessions that are now a feature of the school year in England and Wales" (Scottish Poetry Library).

Coming to fame in the 80s, Duffy witnessed a decade that was reflective of the woman in power then, namely, Margaret Thatcher. A huge change was expected at that time and many of those who voted for the Conservative party for the first time "were restless for change...England was being convulsed by a social, cultural and political counter-revolution. There was violence on the football terraces and on the inner-city streets" (Cowley). Significantly, Duffy was not one of the advocates of Thatcher's neoliberal policies. As the decade unfolded, Thatcher's system proved to undermine the working class which Duffy stood with in and through her poetry. In the mid-80s "the miners were defeated. Free-market fundamentalism was the new orthodoxy. People began to feel richer...The culture became coarser and more reactionary" (Cowley). Aware of her position,

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Duffy's poetry rhymed against the culture of greed and negligence of the poorer class. It is from such a socio-political backdrop that one of the main tenets of Duffy's poetry has become, giving voice to the voiceless.

Duffy's poetry becomes simple yet intriguing when it comes to questions such as position, agency and identity of her poetic personae. In *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, Chris Barker says that, "the concept of agency can be understood to mark the socially determined capability to act and to make a difference. Agency has commonly been associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality and the possibility of change" (Barker 4). The agent then is "a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity" (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). That the validity of agency is connected to the location of the agent is not to be denied. Questions about where the characters in the poems move, where they go/stay, how they carve safe spaces for themselves away from the normative dominant system, whether these spaces are clear or vague, require an interpretive reading of Duffy's work. "Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work. It mows and ploughs" (Bachelard 12). Thus, existing in a certain space dictates specific actions carried out by the subject in relation to the nature of such space.

The nature of the space created in the selected poems is an intriguing one. It is more of an essence as it carries a vaster and more encompassing meaning that the speakers in the poems find themselves entangled in. It is not a clear physical space that one can easily describe nor it is a totally imagined space that does not exist. Jacques Derrida's concept of the undecidable or undecidability offers help in this context. Deconstruction has always been related to the larger

intellectual movement of post-structuralism which emerged in the late sixties of the 20th century, mostly in literary criticism and philosophy. Building on critiques of the previous movement of structuralism, post-structuralism mainly “held that language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a truth or reality outside it but rather a structure or a code, whose parts derive their meaning from their contrast with one another” (Britannica). Another important tenet of post-structuralism is establishing the fact that “...systems were likely to be overbearing and restricting” and therefore need to be subverted; an aspect that is necessary in the foundation of deconstruction. (Bonnycastle 119). The fact that deconstruction itself is not to be defined by one specific definition represents one of its main characteristics. Employing Derrida’s concept of the undecidable as an approach is not unjustified. The selected poems by Duffy foreground an unending space where nothing can be certain, a sense of lack that is present between the lines or the everyday practices and behaviour of the speakers. The differences or fine lines between the characters’ emotions and conflicts are not always clear. The differences are rather undecidable. “Although the...difference is virtually unnoticeable in everyday common experience, when we in fact notice it, we *cannot* decide if we are experiencing a memory or a present perception, if we are experiencing a present perception or an anticipation” (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*). Such ambiguity is problematized because despite the seeming emptiness it provides, it still acts as a possible way to view human life; with all its complexities. It also pertains to the multiplicity of meaning offered by Derrida as deconstruction’s “underpinnings are fundamentally sceptical; that is, it is based on the assumption that it is not possible to develop and communicate valid beliefs about the nature of the world and of human experience” (Bonnycastle 122). This is because of the nature of the undecidable as it is “that which resists binarity or even

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triplicity" (Bates 4). The space examined resembles a state of limbo because it metaphorically does not end. It has its inhabitants caught within a vague state of motion and motionlessness. Attempting to unpack this unending space is guided by the following questions: What is/are the elements that create such ambiguity? Is there a state of lack leading to an unfinished cycle that the characters in the poems find themselves in? Does this unending space represent a microcosm of a bigger world? Is there any meaning inside such a world? What is the nature of such spaces that refuse clear definition? Is there a lost subject implying our loss of agency against such a space? Does this kind of space become a metaphor depicting all what is going on inside us daily, our struggles, our voice and our no voice, our running and our motionlessness? Attempting to answer these questions will be the focus of this paper in the light of Jacques Derrida's concept of the undecidable or undecidability.

In "I Remember Me" from *Standing Female Nude* (1985), there is one central image which foregrounds Derrida's undecidability. A certain truth or meaning seems to be neither present nor absent or rather both present and absent at the same time; in the same space. The first line of the poem, "There are not enough faces" (Duffy 12) marks the lack that the speaker feels and means to hint at. A face is a person, a presence, a support system, a memory. The multiplicity of connotations, which one face can refer to, leads to a serious questioning of the impact of its absence. Yet still, there is a movement of what one face can mean, or rather a reflection of the face that does not stop traveling from one person to the other: "Your own gapes back/at you on someone else, but paler, then the moment/when you see the next one and forget yourself" (12). Is the speaker's "face" the main signifier? Or with its lack, does it change to be a signified waiting to be referred to when a more powerful or a more present signifier shows up? This free play between signifier and signified,

their possible appearances at certain moments and disappearances at other moments mirror the concept of Derrida's undecidable. The undecidability pertains to – or can be a result of – the multiplicity of meanings that one “face” can refer to. This multiplicity is explained by “...the liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified in whatever sense that is understood (Derrida 19).

Duffy's linguistic game of the “other” and “another” is yet another example of the lack of certainty in the imagery. If there are not enough faces around us to allow us to discover ourselves and others as well, “it must be dreams that make us different, must be/private cells inside a common skull./One has the other's look and has another memory” (Duffy 12). If the privacy of the cells in which we are locked in within our own skulls underline a life of isolation, there comes a circulation, once again a movement, between one and the other; exchanging looks and memories. This in turn makes you question the intactness of truth, which builds – ironically – a solid ground for deconstructing it. The kind of truth exchanged within this endless cycle is “wordless barefaced truth” (12). It is still a truth yet it lacks words, lacks language; therefore, lacks understanding. There is a sense of futility and breathlessness which is highlighted as “Despair stares out from tube-trains at itself/running on the platform for the closing door” (12). This despair resembles the condition of life where all are running towards something yet there is no sense of arrival. In a space of uncertainty, even if some meaning is reached, there is another being lost creating this kind of hopelessness. But if you are breathless, then you are running, and if you are running, then you are alive. There lies the creation of the undecidable one more time, namely, the presence and absence of being and unbeing simultaneously. This undecidability – the confusion between despair and hope – “attempts to trouble dualisms, or more accurately, to reveal how they are always

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already troubled”. This takes place because the undecidable “is something that cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy (eg. present/absent, cure/poison, and inside/outside)” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). It is the uncertainty whether one is caught in a cycle of forgetfulness or rather remembrance of the faces around them alongside the uncertainty whether one will keep “running on the platform for the closing door” and if the door will close before arriving that create such undecidability. The final significant detail about “I Remember Me” is that the Duffy ends the poem without putting any punctuation marks. There is no full stop; marking the ruthless ongoingness of the whole process of running in the unending space.

In “Till Our Face”, also from *Standing Female Nude*, (1985) another critical moment is deconstructed leading to a difficulty in deciding whether the meaning is complete or incomplete. The critical moment, that the poem foregrounds, lies deep in the fabric of human experience; it is the moment of orgasm. It is a short poem where the speaker particularly talks about the seconds before, during and after orgasm between a man and a woman. The sharp “pine needles” refer to the man’s phallus and the woman’s vagina is a red “rose” which “glows beneath/the drift of pine needles” (Duffy 19). The two lovers’ faces are united in a metaphor: “...till our face/is a flower soaked in its own scent” (19). Yet the last line of the poem suggests more than one meaning disturbing the peace or the unity of such an intense moment. The last line seems like an intruder: “The planets abandon us” (19). The reader suddenly finds the word “planets” with a connotation of vast worlds “abandoning” the characters in a vast space imposing some questions: Are they alone now? Did the moment end? Are they lost? Where are they abandoned? These interrogatives highlight the complexity of such a moment and its end or rather its *un-end*. It is *an* undecidable. In *Of Grammatology*, the reality of a sexual

relation is said to have a supplementary aspect, it can be a representation rather than a certain form:

All erotic relations have their own supplementary aspect in which we are never present to some ephemeral ‘meaning’ of sexual relations, but always involved in some form of representation. Even if this does not literally take the form of imagining another in the place of, or supplementing the ‘presence’ that is currently with us, and even if we are not always acting out a certain role, or faking certain pleasures, for Derrida, such representations and images are the very conditions of desire and of enjoyment (Derrida 156).

According to Derrida, the concept of an absolute truth is rejected in favour of “concepts of play, interpretation” and a flexible relation between signifier and signified (Sofi). The interrogatives at the end of the poem demonstrate how the “meaning is formed temporarily rather than permanently” (Sofi), hence the sufficiency of representation and image to attain desire and enjoyment. Yet, there remains the ambiguity and the uncertainty of the process which brings about its complexities rather than its being clear or having a known ending.

The title of the poem- “Till Our Face”- is a fragment as well. When the reader reaches the late image which can complete that phrase, “is a flower soaked in its own scent” (Duffy 19), the final line comes right after the metaphor so as to disrupt its sense of completion. The metaphor itself is ambiguous because a flower “soaked in its own scent” can refer to suffocation, not only satisfaction. In her introduction to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak explains one of Derrida’s concepts which he uses to overturn binary thinking: “Derrida’s term is dissemination. Exploiting a false etymological kinship between semantics and semen, Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated...Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings” (lxv).

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This applies to the difficulty of assigning only one meaning to the main foregrounded moment of orgasm. It also is applicable to describe the sexual process that leads to the meaning of the unending: a repetition that yields a sort of satisfaction that lasts only for very few seconds and is interrupted by a cruel sudden sense of abandonment. The frightening symbolism of the deconstructed image disturbs the seemingly complete meanings of beginning and end. Orgasm is a repeated experience, something which is universal, like a cycle. Yet it remains an incomplete cycle where one cannot arrive at a moment of certainty. It is not a safe space; it is rather an unending space where one experiences elation yet abandonment and many shades of emotions in between and after the experience ends. It is a very present abrupt moment of sheer temporariness marking an arrival and a lack of arrival at the same time, just like the rest of human experience in the bigger macrocosmic world.

The same lack of certainty is depicted in “Terza Rima SW19”, from the same book. Language here is a powerful tool that highlights the same lack of fulfillment that is foregrounded in the selected poems under examination. The use of modal verbs expressing possibility is in every stanza of the terza rima. The short poem is about a love story trying to bud between two lovers. The two lovers “walking by the pond seem unaware” (Duffy 17). “He wants her, tells her so” yet there is nothing conveying a certain reaction from the girl. “She half-smiles and stands slightly apart/*He loves me, loves me not*” (17). The girl is not sure whether the man is telling the truth. “It could last a year, she thinks, possibly two/and then crumble like stale bread” (17). The choice of the verb “crumble” in the simile implies the destruction of any positive or certain meaning of love that has not even taken place. The doubt in the tone found in every stanza is significant until the last line: “later she might write or he may phone.” (17). The reader here is left with an open end. We are not sure whether this relationship will

blossom into anything solid, neither are the two lovers. Love is neither certain, nor dead. The trust between the two lovers remains in limbo.

The presence and absence of articulation are two important tools set in contrast so as to deepen the uncertainty of the relation between the two lovers. Duffy inserts a sustained image from nature right beside the many possibilities disturbing the fancy that love is true. It is a visual image of a kestrel flying in the air “till the earth says mouse or vole” (Duffy 17). The earth is articulate, it does not use “may or may not”; it is not “unaware” as the two lovers walking by the pond. The earth simply announces the presence of prey and the kestrel easily gets the message and “flies/across the sun...” till the earth in the exact right moment “cries/Now and death drops from above like a stone” (17). The earth has absolutely no doubt that the rodents are present “now” and it has no doubt that the small falcon will understand. The kestrel as well has no reason not to believe the earth’s message. It is described as “death” that dives in as sharp and quick as a stone falling from above and hitting the right target. The hunt – built on solid trust – is successfully over.

Conversely, the two humans who are capable of articulation through language are caught in a never-ending cycle of doubts – highlighted by the use of modals of possibility – and are dipped in a blurred space of disturbed articulation. To elaborate: “The structures of discourse serve to fix the perpetual slippage of the signified away from the signifier, arresting the free play of difference. Partly through identifying aporias in texts, deconstruction aims to uncover this free play and to destabilize the power to which many structured discourses lay claim.” (The University of Hawaii). Therefore, it can be said that love – especially this kind of innocent sweet budding love between two people – cannot be taken as a fixed sign. The unending space created by multiple

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possibilities leads to a disruption of the meanings of certainty and closure. Is love here a dependable signifier? Or even a clear signified? The lovers are “unaware” (Duffy 17). Love is difficult to decipher in such a context, especially when its foundation is shaken by the deadly accuracy and success of the kestrel image. The certainty by which the natural process of hunting takes place is absent in the adjacent image of the two lovers. This absence renders love questionable, or rather undecidable. They may succeed. They may not.

Intense emotion can be another entrance to the space of the unending by acting out as a strong trigger which aims at the society. In “Free Will” and “Standing Female Nude”, certain social frames are located then disrupted. In “Free Will”, the poem talks about a woman who decides to have an abortion “to take something away from her” (Duffy 22). It is not described as “she will give something away or even get rid of something”, but someone or rather some force will “**take** something away from her”. The binary between body and mind is foregrounded as her mind “counseled like a doctor who had heard it all before” yet “beyond reason, her body mourned” the death of an innocent fetus that had not had its chance of becoming. The woman is poor because she could not take the decision of abortion except “when she had found the money” (22). Thus, this makes the reader wonder: Why does she have to do this? Can a poor woman really have “free will”? Can any woman kill her real maternal instinct and stop her body from naturally mourning when her baby is taken from her? What makes it hard to answer these questions is the simple-complex statement uttered in an astonished tone: “It was nothing yet she found herself grieving nothing” (22). Can we grieve nothing? The baby was still a fetus inside her womb. She has not seen it or held it or heard its voice yet she “mourned” its absence.

Again, the meanings of presence and absence are neither

complete nor absolute. Everything is upside down upon the moment the baby is lost: “Dreams were a nightmare” (Duffy 22). Within this emotional chaos, language is present yet incomprehensible, and paradoxically its absence remains significant: “When words insisted they were silenced with a cigarette” (22). However, every word or thought that the woman tries to silence makes its way in her bloodstream and carves its trace upon her face: “They were in her blood, bobbing like flotsam/as sleep retreated they were strewn across her face” (22). “This is not a trace of the oppositions that have since been deconstructed – on the contrary, the trace is “a rupture within metaphysics, a pattern of incongruities where the metaphysical rubs up against the non-metaphysical, that it is deconstruction’s job to juxtapose as best as it can” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Both presence and absence are indistinguishable in such a human experience, and this is what Derrida explains as the trace. In her PhD thesis, *Derridaen Deconstruction and Feminism*, Pam Papadelos asserts that “Trace suggests that language is undecidable...Derrida locates words like trace that slide between presence and absence” (71); the fact that makes a complete meaning or ended emotion problematic. The woman here is lost among unsaid words. The words are weighing heavily upon her body and mind that she finds herself unable to control her thoughts. When she sleeps, she experiences nightmares, which are an unconscious manifestation of the unsaid. Therefore, the intensity of the emotion does not end. The impact of this feeling is described in the final visual image where the woman remembers an incident from her childhood: “Once, when small, she sliced a worm in half/gazing as it twinned beneath the knife./What she parted would not die despite/the cut, remained inside her all her life” (Duffy 22). If trace – according to Derridaen thought – is “neither presence nor absence but indistinguishably both” (Papadelos 71), then this woman will remain in limbo for the rest of her life wondering

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how the absence of life from the worm she cut means its presence; exactly like how the absence of the baby which she decided to lose means the presence of something which made her body mourn and her dreams turn into a nightmare. The baby is both absent and present. Loss and its residue are infinite in this particular case of abortion, and it can also extend to cover any real loss that a person is subjected to in everyday life.

Before addressing the influence of poverty that is insinuated in “Free Will”, it is worthwhile to look at “Standing Female Nude” as both female figures – and even one male figure – have something in common. In “Standing Female Nude”, a female model who poses for artists narrates one of the times when she stands naked so a young artist can draw her. Poverty sets the scene from the beginning till the end of the poem: “Six hours like this for a few francs...He is concerned with volume, space/I with the next meal” (Duffy 44). Then before the man is totally accused of being the villain who is victimizing the poor model, she simply states: “Both poor, we make our living how we can” (44). Two different life styles are displayed in the poem and both are dictated by social norms. Through deconstructing the woman’s description, the society’s authority becomes clear in how it moulds an artist and how it moulds his model. “These artists take themselves so seriously” (44), the young artist is poor yet he must act like a genius snob who lectures the model around: “You’re getting thin, Madame” (44). Maybe he does not mean to humiliate her; he is just doing his job, or rather the job that the social scene dictates upon him. He knows he must act like this and that her body should fit into the social catalogue of art models. She knows she must make her living by posing in a certain way or else she would not get her next meal despite feeling that “he drains the colour from me” (44). When the reader looks at each element of this tableau, the scene becomes dark as two victims are forced to behave in ways

that they might not have chosen if they had had any power. This meaning becomes crystal clear when the woman asks the artist: “Why do you do this?” and his answer is: “Because I have to. There’s no choice. Don’t talk” (44).

Both model and artist are lost in an infinite space. They are suspended within an unending cycle of dissatisfaction, loss of free will and the necessity of continuation in a life that has been dictated upon them. One must wonder after being subjected to what lies beyond this drawing session: Will their lives go on like this? Is their free will an undecidable? Is it present and absent at the same time? This also extends to include the poor woman who decides to lose her baby in the other poem. That moment of decision is problematized within the framework of the undecidable. This woman was capable of taking a decision yet it is not free because the backdrop of the poem suggests that she is poor and therefore she too is forced by some higher power to get rid of this baby and consequently spends the rest of her life suffering from the aftermath.

A darker excavation in the space where human emotions are floating takes place in the following poems. They draw attention to other entrances to this problematic space of the unending, namely, the impact of past memories and the unseen parts of human psyche. In “Practising Being Dead”, “All Days Lost Days”, “Only Dreaming”, and “I Live Here Now” from *Selling Manhattan* (1987), binaries have really no force, thus questioning “the appropriateness or possibility of locating the truth or ultimate meaning of any event” (Papadelos 21). In “Practising Being Dead”, life and death are not foregrounded as much as their uncertainty. The entity lying in between the living world and the dead is the figure of the ghost. The “ghost” is an undecidable which is neither an indicator for presence nor absence or rather it is both present and absent at the same time. At the beginning of the

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poem, the place is defined by the presence of a ghost: “Your own ghost, you stand in dark rain/and light aches out from the windows/to lie in pools at your feet. This is the place.” (Duffy 1). The poem refers to a game played in childhood where the speaker played dead. Back in time, a child is not aware but of certain truths, namely, that he is not really dead and that he is enjoying the game. Yet as time goes by, the human psyche becomes more complex as life becomes more complicated and unforgiving. The difficulty of the present and the nostalgic perfection of past memories lead to the realization that one is not really living, but rather dead. This is stressed by the image of “your own ghost” staring at you in a dark place. When one is young, we pretend to be dead yet we are alive. When we grow up – amid a chaotic and fragmented world – we pretend to be living yet we can be dead inside. The memory lives on however.

The uncertainty continues as one is not really sure of his own status of presence or absence: “You are both watching and remembering. Neither...It is accidental and unbearable to recall that time/neither bitter nor sweet but gone” (Duffy 1). The effect of the memory opens up a chasm to the vague space of the unending where we are caught between present and past. The speaker seems to be in and out of his/her experience, both temporally and spatially. It is never certain when one totally loses the influence of past memories nor get rid of his/her own “ghost”.

The image of the “ghost” reoccurs in “Only Dreaming” in a context intensifying the disturbing uncertainty which results from being in such a space as the unending. The poem is an imagined sexual scene experienced by the speaker: “A ghost loves you, has got inside you in the dark” (Duffy 52). The atmosphere is marked by darkness again and the speaker wonders “whose face” the ghost wears. The vague entity is a repeated undecidable neither totally

existing nor totally unreal. The state of presence is marked by the vivid and realistic reactions of the speaker as she feels what the ghost is doing to her, yet the state of absence is strongly present as well: “Yes, you say in your sleep to nothing, *Darling*” (52). It is further highlighted by the confession of the speaker: “This is the real thing” as she describes him: “The ghost is devoted, stares into your eyes behind the lids” (52). The concreteness implying the actual presence of the ghost is cut by the sudden realization he is not there: “Your hand grasps him, pass straight through, wake you touching yourself” (52). This may seem like a simple visual image yet it symbolizes the complications one can face because of an imagined – rather confused – experience. The cruelty of it lies in the fact that one is never certain of reaching – metaphorically grasping – a meaning. The undecidable nature of the ghost, which can imply a lot of signifiers in life that we cannot really decipher, renders the one subjected to it disconcerted. Experiencing both its presence and absence characterizes our human experience. Even if the speaker in the poem wakes up masturbating – as a result of the whole erotic ghostly dream – it is still a fake outcome because there is no actual mutual physical relation.

The ending of the poem underscores the confusion and is similar to the final line in the previously discussed poem, “Till our Face”. In “Only Dreaming”, the deconstructive concepts of “trace” and “dissemination” reoccur as the speaker finally is “crying aloud into the room. Abandoned” (Duffy 52). In “Till our Face”, the temporary moment of orgasm ends and “the planets abandon us” (Duffy 19). It does not really matter if the brief moment of pleasure results from a real sexual experience or an imagined one, the result is the same: abandonment. This negates the complete meaning of joy and affirms the never-ending cycle of interrupted emotions. It also reflects the concept of dissemination in which the whole experience neither is fertile nor fruitless. It is again – symbolically – the space in

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which we are all abandoned. Is there a superiority of one binary over the other? No. There is presence and absence at the same time.

The figure of the ghost is furthermore problematic if examined from a spatiotemporal perspective. Derrida develops the idea that absence leaves a trace. Just like the woman in “Free Will”, who decides to have an abortion, the absence of the baby leaves a trace that she never manages to erase. The trace is this mark of the absence of a presence that is not at the center anymore. What has vanished or what is chosen not to be seen or said by people is the element in control. Be it the fetus that had not come into being or the ghost of childhood memories haunting the speaker in “Practising Being Dead” or the ghost figure in “Only Dreaming”, these entities are not bound only to the past or present, they are rather present at any given moment. They even keep controlling the future of the subjects whether they are conscious or subconscious about them. Here comes the intersection between time and space. The nature of such undecidable entities locks us up in the space of the unending. It is the space where most – if not all – human experiences take place. There is no clear point of departure or arrival. Dreams and past memories will haunt us all the time.

It is also noteworthy to reflect upon the nature of the experience itself. It is a dream. A dream itself can be classified as an undecidable. It is the perfect context in which intense emotions can lead to a confused state where people realize how they truly live in the space of the unending. It is not a space where one only gets lost or only knows the way. It is both. A dream is always questionable, especially the moment – like the one described in “Only Dreaming” – where one is not totally positive if what is happening is real or part of the dream. In her introduction to *Of Grammatology*, Spivak explains how Derrida notices “the play of revelation and concealment lodged

within parts of individual words” (xlvi). The word “dream” or “dreaming” can be a perfect medium for such a contradictory revealed and/or concealed experience. Sometimes, you never really recall what happened in a dream and thus you arrive at nothing. The dream in this poem is like a “supplement”, it is “neither part of nor outside of the thing itself” (Papadelos 74). The ghost is imagined, so it is not literally part of the sexual experience yet it cannot be escaped because the consequent moment of pleasure felt – then lost – is real. “The logic of supplementarity not only challenges binaries but it challenges the logic on which binaries are based on” (74). The confusion between presence and absence here mirrors the loss of binaries. One cannot be totally elated nor totally abandoned. This happens because human experiences – whether sexual like in this poem or any other – never end. The cycle goes on with no particular point of arrival. And therefore, “Meaning cannot be independent...as it relies on traces of traces” (83).

Both “I Live Here Now” and “All Days Lost Days” as well elaborate the same idea of an uncontrolled time leading to an unending space. Duffy employs subtle yet strong signs of lack, which is another irritating characteristic of the unending. The speaker in “I live Here Now” describes the place she lives in at the moment and remembers how it looked like in the past. She is the same person but her feelings of loss and of lack are apparent because she cannot reclaim the past memory of “the place where the pond/was a doll’s mirror and the trees were bits of twig” (Duffy 10). The tender metaphor where the pond is seen as a mirror through a child’s eyes is reflective of a Romantic nostalgia toward a glorified childhood. The spontaneous creativity of children is clear when the speaker refers to her own imagination when she was a child: “I invented it, that wee dog barking/at the postman (an old soldier with one arm)” (10). The ghosts of lack are present though, tarnishing the completeness of a

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past so strong that it leaves a trace and the completeness of a present interrupted by the unforgetfulness of the past: “I live here now/and sometimes wave back, over the fields, the years” (10). The dog is “wee” which is Scottish for little. The postman was with one arm and “Being grown yourself was half a dream”. Even the clouds which are present now are “cunningly placed which never rain” (10). These incomplete images show that the sense of lack is felt all through the way. Amid past figures and places falling apart, one cannot help but question the real presence and whereabouts of the speaker: Is she ‘really’ here now? Is she still living in the old place where the pond was a doll’s mirror? Probably, she is suspended in a current unending space unable to control the remembrance of things past; a state which is relentless yet continuous.

The experience gets even more hectic through the use – and repetition – of prepositions in “All Days Lost Days”. “Living/in and out of the past/inexplicably/ so many things have died in me./ In and out like a tide/each tear/holds a tiny hologram./Even this early/I am full of years.” (Duffy 41). The lines in this poem are short and the lack is felt through the images of death; death inside the speaker where she feels that so many things had already died within her as time goes by. Death is recurrent where she can see “little gravestones/where memory/stands in the wild grass/watching the future/arrive in a line of big black cars” (41). The future is a funeral scene implying a much darker realization of a time that the speaker is doubtful of living because “all days lost days, in and out of themselves” (41). The uncertainty of existence shown in the procession of big black cars signifying death interrupts the physical presence; once again deconstructing meaning and infiltrating any sense of completion. There is lack in the fact that you cannot fully enjoy the presence as you are certain of the absence coming along. The ghost is again present in the image of the “hologram”. A hologram is an unreal

three-dimensional figure of something – or of nothing actually. You can see it yet you cannot touch it. The cycle which does not end between past, present and future is underscored by the repetition of motion “in and out” all the time. Finally, the days never end, “all days, lost days, in and out of themselves/between dreaming/and dreaming again and half-remembering” (41). Or rather there is a feeling that they do end and do not end at the same time. The days are coiling around themselves in and out depicting a serpentine movement that again seems ruthless yet real. One is caught in between the coiling days and cannot help, but coil along with no real sense of arrival. One is not fully in nor out, but rather “like a tide”; moved by some external force, like that of the moonlight; something which one has no control over.

The trace, in Derrida’s terms, is the absence of presence. It represents one of the most important hinge words equivalent to the “undecidable” in Derridaen thought. “The hinge marks the impossibility that a sign, the unity of a signifier and a signified, be produced within the plenitude of a present and an absolute presence...Before thinking to reduce it or to restore the meaning of the full speech which claims to be truth, one must ask the question of meaning and of its origin in difference. Such is the place of a problematic of the trace” (Derrida 69-70). If it is but only an illusion of presence, then the child’s world is a present that is absent in a ruthless world of dark secrets, lies and unfortunately real hidden truths represented in the village community. It can also represent a masking of the present of the villages’ people because they are seemingly present – thus literally absent – yet each one of them is actually hooked by what is inside him/her. Neither the outside world on its own nor the inside world on its own can be an absolute sign of what is really happening inside that village.

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The above discussed poems represent characters simultaneously moving and stuck in a space of the unending. In the light of Derridaen undecidability and the effect of the trace, these characters' subjectivity, and consequently their agency, create some sort of a problematic. Do these characters have agency in such a vague space? "This model of subjectivity is...difficult to describe as there are no fixed components or tenets" of the construction of a subject in the light of deconstruction (Papadelos 53). Is this subject dominant/subordinate? Present/absent? Unified/transforming? In his paper, "Derrida, Nietzsche and the Return to the Subject", Michael A. Peters argues that Derrida has never dismissed the notion of the subject or completely erased political agency as many critiques of deconstruction assert. The key is to look closely where this subject is coming from:

I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse, one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions. (Derrida Qtd. in Peters)

In "Mean Time", from *Mean Time* (1993), the speaker says, "The clocks slid back an hour/and stole light from my life" (Duffy 47). Are the characters in the poems discussed above robbed of control over their lives? Mean 'time' here seems to be the active agent who is stealing light from people leading them to the final acceptance of their mortality: "But we will be dead, as we know/beyond all light. These are the shortened days/and the endless nights" (47). This sense of endlessness is a common factor in the poems. The villagers in "Modal Village" are forever trapped between performing false roles in their community and their own endless internal psychological torment. The subjects in "I Remember Me", "All Days Lost Days", and "I Live

Here Now” are incapable of living completely in their present because there is an infinite connection to moments in their past. Similarly, the subjects in “Free Will” and “Standing Female Nude” are entangled in a social trap no matter how they try to evade it as well as the subjects in “Terza Rima” and “Till Our Face” who are left on the edge, abandoned with the powerful trace of uncertainty. All these characters can be active subjects at some points yet they do not have full control. The notion that such subjects are active agents without other considerations cannot be true in the contexts given in the poems. The force of the “endless nights” in “Mean Time” (47) or the power of the despair that “stares out from tube-trains at itself/running on the platform for the closing door” in “I Remember Me” from *Standing Female Nude* (12) – both creating a space of the unending, be it inside or outside us – are the real active agents taking full control of the people entangled within their labyrinths, never arriving at a certain destination.

This might make the subject seem destroyed or with absolutely no control over his/her life, proving a powerful critique of Derridaen deconstruction right as completely obliterating the notion of the subject. Yet, Derrida’s insistence that we cannot escape the subject points to a different opinion. Derrida’s attempt to problematize the need to establish full presence led him to establish concepts such as “trace” and the “undecidable”. Therefore, the subject at work in the poems in this chapter is functioning yet not fully functioning. He/she is present and absent at the same time in a vague context beyond his/her understanding. Canceling any cliché binary opposition, the space of the unending is coiling around us, allowing us to move, walk, run, dream, practice all lively actions yet simultaneously keeping us in the chase. The sense of no destination is looming above the characters in the poems previously analyzed making them subjects and objects all together. The space they are coming from makes them present and

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absent, dominant at times and subordinate at times, static in their embracing of the past and dynamic in their forced motion in the present.

Consequently, it is hard to decide who is spinning in the shadow of the other. The lack of a center might be the most apparent feature of a chaotic kind of movement that never ends. Man will always run in search of many meanings in a space of the unending, enjoying some findings yet never fully attaining presence. This vague space that keeps man in limbo unmasks pretences of centrality and control. Man has some agency to create, yet along the way, he keeps creating a mess. The characters who cannot reconcile with their present are a mess inside, yet they keep going. The villagers' dark secrets create a mess which keeps them in torment and they keep acting in a world of "fiction" as the librarian points out. The model in "Standing Female Nude" leads a messy life, regardless of how she understands where she and the poor artist who draws her stand. The abandoned woman in "Only Dreaming" is a mess of emotions and longing that she dreams of a ghost in love with her. Examining the endlessness and ongoingness of the space felt in the lives' of the characters here allows the reader to feel and reflect upon such uncertainty making these poems very post-structuralist in nature as this reflection always "consists of a perpetual detour towards a 'truth' that has lost any status or finality." (Young 6) When this truth or this meaning loses the ego of centrality and acquires an agency of lack, this is time when Derridaen undecidability makes sense.

Derrida's employment of the strategy of undecidability is yet more significant when it comes to demolishing binaries as it simulates human daily life. The problematic created by the unlimitedness of the space of the unending is well reflected by such a strategy. This is because such strategy helps dismantle any binary oppositions that may

confine the spaces in which and by which humans occupy and express themselves. The uncertainty of such spaces was underscored in the above characters. There remains the relation between undecidability and the elusive nature of the unending space found in the poems as well as how it works to dissolve binaries. Time and space are not superior in such cases. The events experienced by the characters discussed in the above poems could happen at any given time in any given place. A poor pregnant woman who is forced to lose her fetus is a universal symbolic figure that has the ability to put the oppressive system she is embedded in in shame. The undecidable helps demolish the binaries through which such a figure can be condemned by the society or even the reader. This condemnation takes place because of the superiority of centrality. The poor woman is not considered the center; therefore, she is easily condemned by the centralized norms of the society. Whatever lies on the margin is not valid as a source of truth and/or knowledge. The narrative produced is like misunderstood language or no language at all. In her book, *The Undecidable: Jacques Derrida and Paul Howard*, Clare Gorman defines the strategy of undecidability as:

the bleeding of boundaries between terms where the membrane which creates the binary opposition becomes plexus. This means that when binaries are dismantled they transfuse and merge so that meaning and interpretation is altered. It is within this crossing of borders, limits, genres and ideological constructs that ambiguity dwells and creates new perspectives and interpretations (3).

This underscores the importance of Derridean undecidability when it comes to demolishing binaries in order to generate new meanings. It allows a network of meanings, namely, a “plexus” thus escaping from the centrality of one overarching meaning produced by a certain authority. Consequently, the meanings on the margin will be taken into consideration.

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The boundaries between reality and dreams bleed once more in “Practicing Being Dead” and “Only Dreaming”. The concept of undecidability here helps destroy the notion that we are totally controlled by our dreams or by our reality. The ghost – symbolizing nostalgia in the first poem and sexual desire in the second one – is both present and absent as explained before. Yet, neither its presence nor its absence is centralized. Both states coexist at the same time thus rendering the space they exist in as unending. One cannot get out of such a space. Such undecidability validates the nature of the space of the unending. It is not unusual at all for all humans to go through such ambiguous experiences every day. It also establishes that uncertainty dwells at the heart of human emotions.

In “Standing Female Nude”, neither male or female is dominant. “[T]he fundamentals for deconstructing this binary opposition...involves first reversing and then reinscribing it into a new structure and a new discursive field, wherein the two elements of a binary opposition ooze into each other and create what can be termed an undecidable” (Gorman 4). Both the male artist and the female model are subjected to and influenced by the more powerful sociopolitical atmosphere around them. When they are seen as products of their own society, they are no longer classified as good and evil. They are reinscribed into a new structure where they melt and create figures who can be both victim and non-victim, namely, an undecidable. The model has a choice not to pose for the painting yet she knows she needs it “for the next meal”. The artist is acting as a snob who at the end of the day is revealed as a poor man who is aware they both “have to” do this. He is “draining the life” out of her but when they both ooze into one another, he too is seen as being “drained” (Duffy 44). The politics of space here dictates such a shift from the binary of male/female which is lost in the light of undecidability and goes to the more oppressive power which is an

overarching capitalist snobbish society setting moulds for both men and women.

The outcome – no matter how undecidable in nature it is – of the clashes that take place between the human self and the external and/or internal forces is the thing that again preserves the characteristic of us being humans. In “Free Will”, the poor woman’s personal desire to abort her baby results from a weakness or fear due to the suffocating social conditions. She is not totally a free agent despite the fact she took the decision. The melting of binaries allows the reader to see that this woman did not win when she got rid of her baby, although seemingly she might have acted appropriately in the light of her poverty. Yet, there is no centrality of judgment as discussed before. This woman now will remain in limbo. She is not a winner and at the same time this overpowering society did not manage to turn her to stone. The outcoming undecidable feeling will linger within her forever. From now on, this will define who she will become. The same result is produced in “Standing Female Nude”, the disappearing binaries oozing into each other results in a victim perspective, thus, both male/female are not seen as superior to one another. The melting line between reality and imagination/dream in “Practicing Being Dead” and “Only Dreaming” leads to the ambiguous realization that confusion might be the new meaning produced and thus the meaning that defines part of our existence. These episodes are full of what Gorman calls “cracks and fault lines” which “demonstrate the problematic nature of boundaries and crack open and disturb the tranquility” of what is dominant or stable or central (Gorman 4).

Characters full of cracks and fault lines help destroy another binary, namely, the active/passive. Emotions do not wait; they just happen and in most cases they are complex. The many thoughts in

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one's mind, the confusion, the endless running without a sense of arrival – as reflected in the image of the tube in “I Remember Me” – keep clashing and bumping non-stop into an unending space. Sometimes, we can pick and choose what to think about, yet in the background we are endlessly bound to thinking, running and reaching for the door of the train which never stops. We are both active and passive. It is again an undecidable and it is this elusive nature that allows us such a perspective that deconstructs our sense of ego or supremacy. It lays us bare in front of ourselves. In other words, it destroys the “authority of the ‘is’” (Gorman 9).

In addition to dismantling binaries, undecidability helps read our lives. Just like the space we are bound to run in, our lives seem to be running endlessly. Despite the fact that one's life will end at some moment, one is bound to get lost in certain moments – ironically – because of their ambiguity; just like the moments described in the above poems. The nature of deconstruction – and specifically Derridean undecidability – is similar to how we should read our daily experiences. Gorman states that “deconstruction does not take place separately from the text but only arises from a moment of close reading” (Gorman 9). The perspective that Duffy presents in the previously analyzed poems presents the possibility of comparison. The life of the characters - that universally could be anybody – are the text and we should stop for a moment to read such lives. It is this moment when dismantling binaries makes sense because it pertains to our complex nature as humans where emotions melt, and two poles ooze into each other.

When such binaries are demolished, Duffy's poems allow one to reflect upon the nature of his/her own life. Derrida asserts that “centres are constructs that deny their own contractedness in order to deceive individuals that this “moment of the present, the absolute

‘this’ time, or the now” is a creation “which excludes from itself all multiplicity” (Qtd. in Gorman 11). Derrida insists that it is necessary to begin thinking that there is no centre, or at least question that these centres have no natural site” (11). Reading one’s life with the realization that there is no center dictating a certain meaning disrobes life from a negative sense of familiarity. Such unfamiliarity pertains more to a multiplicity of meanings rather than only one. The space of the unending – where all such action/lack of action takes place – can have no center. It should be read as a cycle, infinitely everchanging. It resembles the paradox of a circle. As a geometrical shape, the circle is considered a perfect form with a precise circumference and equal distances to its center. Yet, it is revolving in a non-stop motion. None of the characters in the poems can be the center and the external forces they are subjected to cannot also be the center on their own. They both exist in such a non-stop motion, always generating meanings and in a way creating, cancelling and exchanging centers all the time. This is why Gorman explains that, “what deconstruction sets about doing is defying the binary either/or logic thought a more ambiguous logic of both/and” (12).

The reader is able to discover the undecidables created in the poems, whether in the characters’ behaviour or emotions or perspectives. The undecidable comes as a result of the disappearance of binary oppositions. “Each half of the opposition is not an isolated concept but a necessary part of the structure as a whole. The signifiers of language itself deconstruct any attempts at separation.” (Gorman 13). This is why imagination and reality will not only be side to side but will also defy a clear dividing line, just like virtue and sin, and past and present. “Deconstruction seeks to dismantle the logic of these binaries by showing that either half of the binary is not an independent entity but depends on the other through mutual contamination” (13). It is the nature of the vast space of the unending where such melting of

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binaries occurs that allows the reader to notice the lack of agency or rather both its presence and absence at the same time. And it is in such a space that the characters reflect the complexity of life, a complexity that does not necessitate the presence of a binary opposition which dictates upon humans what and how to feel.

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