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Speaking the Unspoken: The Poetry of Mary Dorcey

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MARY DORCEY is that almost unimaginable phenomenon, an Irish lesbian whose fiction and poetry, though manifestly “out,” are praised and published in Ireland. Her first collection of stories, A Noise from the Woodshed, won the Rooney Prize for literature in 1989, an annual award intended “to reward and encourage Irish writing talent.” Like her first collection of poems, Kindling (1982), these stories were published by the London feminist press, Onlywomen Press, but her second volume of poetry, Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers (1991) (it includes some poems from Kindling), was published by Salmon in Galway, which launches much new Irish poetry. The move to a mainstream Irish publishing house is in keeping with Mary Dorcey’s opinion that her writing is reaching out to “a growing secular and liberal section in Irish society” eager for “images and creative work that acknowledge the reality of the world we live in.” The challenge confronting her as a lesbian writer is at once political and technical: “how to write about a subject that is daily life for her “but a totally strange territory for most readers.”

Dorcey’s short fictions, collected in A Noise from the Woodshed, are likely to prove more instructive than her lyrics as a medium for familiarizing the heterosexual reader with a “totally strange territory.” “A Country Dance” is a powerful story which counterpoints the sudden mutual recognition of sexual attraction between two women with its simultaneous recognition and sullying by a group of homophobic louts at a country disco. We are made to empathize with the threatened couple as they dance surrounded by a hostile and mocking crowd which in its curiosity and antagonism treats them like animals. “Introducing Nessa” details a Dublin teacher’s subterfuges and evasions as she attempts to hide her lesbian affaire from her mother, colleagues, suburban neighbours, and old friends, compelled to deny her love for the sake of appearing respectable and normal. “The Husband” charts the progress of an urban wife’s lesbian courtship from the viewpoint of her liberal husband, whose presuppositions and predictions about the course of this relationship are repeatedly proved wrong. This is a double-edged story in that the narrative is filtered through the consciousness of a heterosexual character, a straight reader surrogate, who is both educated

about lesbianism and at the same time relegated to the status of permanent alien. The title story of the collection is a technically adventurous monologue, a woman's lengthy address to her lover, which deploys conversational excess, humour, and verbal high jinks to express libidinality. Action is hypothetical and always awash on a flood of talk in this story, where stream of chatter instead of stream of consciousness becomes a medium for communicating lesbian desire.

Like her stories, Mary Dorcey’s poetry introduces a new experiential content into Irish writing. Hers is an intrinsically woman-identified poetry which constantly privileges female experience. The women who populate the poems are usually cast in the relational roles of mothers, daughters, sisters, lovers, friends. What is constructed is a women’s community, for the most part indifferent to men rather than hostile. Only a few of the poems are explicitly socio-political; most voice personal loves and griefs, bodily and emotional intimacies.

Hélène Cixous conceived of woman-identified writing as “a force... that will knock the wind out of the codes.” I see Mary Dorcey’s poetry as a disruptive intervention in Irish literature, a fundamental critique of established definitions and values relating to the representation of women. Her articulation of a woman-centred sexuality is integral to her introduction of a new female imaginary, but her subversiveness is not limited to a transvaluing of the heterosexual romantic script. This is a discourse in which women’s presence to each other is a primary feature of narrative, in which women figure as subject, narrator, and addressee. In consistently speaking as a woman and to women it initiates a new dialogue that interrupts the masculinist or heterosexist rhetoric of Irish writing.

Remarkably, in the case of a writer who is breaking a long lesbian silence in Irish verse, the poems reveal none of the anxieties about authorship that have obsessed Anglo-American feminism: no search for artistic foremothers or an enabling aesthetic tradition, no consciousness of using “words that are hardly syllabled yet,” no overt counterplotting against male literary hegemony. Dorcey’s poetry contrives to appear extra-literary, conveying the impression that it is an everyday utterance, remote from bookish knowledge and concerns, unconscious of mythology, historiography, literary ancestry. The classic/romantic aesthetic divide, as interpreted by Dorcey, is a gendered dichotomy. For her, women’s art derives primarily from life; men’s from literature. Men’s writing is cerebral, the product of the study or the library, isolated from the speech of the common workplace: “men ‘think aloud’ at others.” She, on the contrary, speaks out of the margins of culture in the real language of women.

Women’s language is identified by Dorcey not with the Kristevaean semiotic but with talk. Talk is for her a mother tongue. Whereas men tend to write in a “thinking voice,” “the speaking voice is... characteristic of women.” What Dorcey aims at achieving in her writing is an “artistic semblance” of the speaking

voice of actual women. The source of her poetic language is the “talking of women that I heard all about me from my earliest years—the voice of my mother, my grandmother, my aunts and their friends... working and sitting in the kitchen talking.” Her narrative model is, therefore, conversational, as dependent on listening as on speaking. The assumption of a listener is all-important, either a dramatic character inside the poem or the reader as auditor or eavesdropper. So, though Dorcey’s naturalistic literary style is at odds with the defamiliarizing linguistic strategies of such lesbian precursors as Monique Wittig and Mary Daly, she defends their deformation of words and sentences because it enables the reader “to hear better.” Dorcey’s own artistic exemplars are Flannery O’Connor, Grace Paley, Jean Rhys, and Judy Grahn, who “scarcey use one startling or ostentatious word” yet compel “an out-of-the-ordinary degree of attention.” She wants to write a “plain, unadorned, bare language, with so much space between each word that the reader or listener hears the words quite differently from usual.” In practice, this results in a poetry that is short-lined and almost adjectiveless, with many lines consisting of a single word. The vernacular Dorcey adopts is the lingua franca of contemporary Irishwomen, RTE English, never dialect. As well as enabling her to communicate with women from a cross section of Irish society and from outside Ireland, it allows access into areas of womanly experience that high culture would have debarred. Talk ensures that the poetic line is a lifeline. The simulation of vernacular speech is not altogether unproblematic, sometimes resulting in flat, inert verse. Yet the talking mode is responsible for the freshness of the poetry, its air of frankness and authenticity, its way of engaging the reader, the directness of its emotional impact.

In this essay I focus on Dorcey’s new poetry collected in Part I of Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers. (Part II consists of fourteen poems from the 1982 collection, Kindling.) The three areas with which this poetry is most concerned are socio-political issues, lesbian sexuality, and daughter-mother bonding. The last seems to me the area in which Dorcey speaks most memorably and movingly.

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I begin with Dorcey’s socio-political poetry, using the phrase in a restricted sense to indicate poetry that is ethically engaged, since from the perspective of gender politics, her entire oeuvre is politically committed. Dorcey’s socio-political verse is didactic, consciousness-raising, insistent, a platform art that lends itself to public performance. It is usually addressed to a plural and unknown audience rather than an intimate friend or relation. It seeks to make an instant impact and tends to rely heavily on repetition and refrain both to establish an accessible formal structure and for purposes of emphasis. It is almost always a transgressive poetry that sets out to jolt, disturb, or shake its audience.

The opening poem in Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers, “In the City of Boston,” is of this rhetorical kind, an immediate declaration of Dorcey’s feminist allegiance to the socially deviant and disruptive. Female madness is often regarded by feminists as an expression of rage against or escape from
patriarchal control; here, as in the story “Miss Callaghan’s Day Out,” Dorcey is interested in the limits of female rebellion. Unlike the story, which is mediated through the consciousness of the matricidal Miss Callaghan, the poem presents the madwoman externally; seeing, used fifteen times, is its controlling narrative verb. The madwoman of the poem was observed striding along an elegant Boston square at lunchtime, her head “thrown back, jaws wide,” screaming. Despite her evident craziness she was neatly dressed in a matching outfit, “blue coat, blue hat, blue purse/blue shoes,” and, more astonishing still, at the crossing,

her polished shoes halted,
she lowered her head,
the animal howl died in her throat—
stock still, patient, ordered
she stood
because the traffic light was red.

The anecdote is framed by two stanzas which point to its function as a graphic illustration of women’s difficulty in overcoming their socialization into ladylike decorum and submissiveness. Through a change of pronoun from “them” to “us” in the concluding lines the narrator identifies with those women who fail to liberate themselves totally:

I have seen madwomen in my time
—I have never seen us mad enough.

“In the City of Boston,” prominently placed at the outset of Dorcey’s new volume, is a feminist parable which treats transgressiveness as a positive and suggests that the woman poet must strive to break free from inhibiting orthodoxies. The well-made poem may be the lyrical equivalent of the well-accessorized suit and polished shoes.

“Deliberately Personal” dramatizes the speaker’s anti-genteel stance and her alienation from her polite female audience whom she accuses of complicity in the victimization of women. The poem consists of a series of increasingly hostile rhetorical questions and concludes by exposing the rift between the speaker and her public, who had expected her to entertain, not discomfit, them:

And who are you
come to that?
All of you
out there
out of the spotlight—
out for a night’s entertainment,
smiles upturned so politely;
asking me
why I have to be—
so raw
and deliberately
personal?

In “The Ordinary Woman,” where the narrator is again at odds with her female audience, she lets them down more lightly:
And again you ask me why—
Why don’t I write a poem about
The ordinary woman?
Not the extreme, individual case.
But the normal woman, the average woman
The everyday woman?

Her response is to list almost two hundred categories of women in a good-humoured reductio ad absurdum of the essentialist perception that there is a female norm, e.g.,

- The woman who stays at home
- The woman who has no home
- The woman who raises children
- The woman who can have no children
- The woman who has too many children
- The woman who wants no children.

The poem depends on cumulative excess rather than on witty juxtaposition to make its point, celebrating the heterogeneity and diversity of women.

Dorcey became involved in the Irish Women’s Movement in 1972 and was a founder member of Irishwomen United, the second organized feminist group in Ireland. Twenty years later, her poetry displays little commitment to organized feminism. “Songs of Peace,” written “for a young woman marching against war in the streets of Dublin,” is a disillusioned veteran’s response to an enthusiastic newcomer to pacifism. Very few of the newer poems are overtly political; personal rather than collective relationship is Dorcey’s forte. Her most daring assault on the settled pieties of Irish life occurs when private and public worlds intersect in “Come Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear.” Lesbian lovemaking in this raunchy, outrageous poem coincides with the Angelus and 6:00 news on RTE 1, the t.v. turned up to full volume to block out the lovers’ uproarious enjoyment. Through comically blasphemous cutting between screen and “real life” images, Catholic prayer and iconography are implicated in lesbian coupling, the Blessed Virgin drawn into the orgy and the Hail Mary adapted to an orgasmic chant:

And the word was made flesh
and dwelt amongst us.
Hands skin mouth thighs
in the bedrock of flesh
sounding,
fields flooded
blood uncoursed.
Blessed art thou
and blessed is the fruit
of thy womb.
Bitter and sweet
earth opens stars collide.
Blessed and sweet,
the fruit
among women
Hail Mary Holy Mary.
Erotic extravaganza is then inter-cut with images from the news, all of which report bodily assaults on women: demonstrating that such violence is as much part of “the necessary, daily litany” of life in Ireland as the Angelus. The splicing of lesbian lovemaking and heterosexual brutality provides a series of quick contrasting close-up shots of the caressing and violation of women’s bodies. In misogynistic Ireland lesbian sexuality takes place as secretly as rape and murder (“no one heard her scream”). Raucous with libidinal energy, this poem makes a bold statement about the Irish obsession with the control of women’s bodies.

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Most of the new poems in Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers are love poems, focusing on woman-centered sexuality. They are also political poems in that they offer a recuperative version of lesbian erotic life, presenting the primary intensity of the homosexual bodily relation with respect and reverence. Dorcey’s love poetry is almost lacking in what Henry James called “solidity of specification.” Context is alluded to, not described. For the author of A Noise from the Woodshed, equally at ease in conjuring up the suburban or rural settings and socioscapes of 1980s Ireland, such minimal contextualization is clearly deliberate, a world well lost. What she concentrates on in her love poetry is reactions and emotions, not setting or situation. In this respect, “Return” is paradigmatic, since it regards people and their paraphernalia as so many impediments to the sighting of the lover at a train station:

And everything will conspire
against me: luggage and children
crowding the aisle. A white haired
woman, home from England,

Awkward with haste, will labour
her case to the door, her floral
print dress, a last check between me
and my first glimpse of you.

In “Sea Change” the absence of contextualization contributes to the effect of complete absorption in intimate lovemaking, as do the deployment of a first-person narrator, present-tense plotting towards climax, and a gradual shift from tactile images and sensuous similes to total immersion in orgasmic, oceanic metaphor:

The dizzy lurch and sway—
sea flowers under water;
changing skins with every touch
and then, and again, that voice
—your voice, breaking over me,
opening earth with its call
and rocking the moon in her tide.

“Come Close to Me” and “Not Everyone Sees This Night” also celebrate lesbian sensuality, although Dorcey’s love poetry dwells much more frequently on the distressing transitoriness of love than on jouissance.
“Beginning,” the second poem in the collection, introduces the book’s dominant theme, the aftermath of love. Narrated in a breezy, anecdotal style, it contrasts a rejected lover’s public display of nonchalance with the private persistence of closeted desire. It is skillfully plotted so that the conclusion which is a shock to reader sensibilities also comes as a shock in narrative terms. Nothing in the parade of images of external crispness nor in the jaunty tone in which these are catalogued prepares us for the intimate and messy finale in which “beginning” is overtaken by ending:

that for months
she still slept
in your blood stained
sheets.

Other poems about rejected love are more decorous and reticent. “Because She Carried Flowers,” which encodes eroticism in traditional flower imagery, is tart rather than triste, deploying half-rhyme with succinct fatality:

Because she carried flowers:
Lilac and wild red poppies
When first she came to my bed,
I loved her.

Because she carried flowers:
Marigold and lilies
To another woman’s bed,
I left her.

Another flower poem “Snow-in-Summer” is minimalist and understated in its movement from seasonal expansiveness to bodily tension, relying on a single verbal contrast for much of its emotional impact:

April came, then May—
lilac blossom,
cowslip,
snow-in-summer
rampant—
still I woke each morning
with my fists
clanched.

In “I Will Leave This Place” the combination of formal brevity and starkly simple language suggests tight-lipped restraint:

I will leave this place,
and go somewhere
you are not known.
Days might pass,
without hearing your name.

“Therapist,” by contrast, is confessional. Talking and listening are integral to the conduct of this poem where the speaker, conscious how her account of a love affair is being assessed by her clinically detached psychotherapist, inaudibly
solicits the reader’s support. While talk is conducive to humiliating frankness in “Therapist,” in “If Only She Had Told You Beforehand,” reported speech is wryly used against a lover, tacitly exposing her self-deception. Here, as in “Love’s Labour Lost,” Dorcey shows that lesbian romance does not exclude humour.

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“LESBIANS ARE the poets of the humanity of women,” Nicole Brossard wrote in The Aerial Letter. Dorcey’s poetic cherishing of women’s humanity is most evident in her lyrics voiced for a daughter. Several poems allude to the peculiar importance of her primal maternal bonding for the lesbian. In “Silences,” a mature woman’s devoted nursing of her dying mother is attributed to her “love of women”:

the old secret that binds you here,  
that has shaped your hands  
for this last work  
The love begun with this woman  
that now seals her life.

A poem recalling an idyllic childhood relationship with the mother is entitled “First Love,” and in “Return” the trope of homecoming to describe a lovers’ reunion merges daughterly love and eroticism:

And in that moment—your laughter,  
the heat of your neck at my mouth,  
it will all be behind me again,  
I swear, as though coming home—  
as though for the first time.

Since Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own the image of women’s space has conjured up an enabling artistic environment. Feminist readers will probably approach Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers with an expectation that it will belong in the same line of descent as Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Whether or not the change from the original title, Not Everyone Sees This Night, was a feminist marketing strategy, it does point the reader to the most innovative poetry in the collection. For Dorcey envisages the clearing of space, not as a pioneering enterprise, the opening up of new frontiers, but as vacating one’s place, ceding ground. She confronts the tragic fact that generational replacement is integral to the maternal relation: daughters “grow high and lovely from” their mother’s “shrinking hide.” Whereas recent discourse on daughter-mother bonding has concentrated on the pre-Oedipal phase, Dorcey’s recent verse focuses on the closing stages of the relationship. The most moving of her poems are those which speak about the painful, almost taboo subject of women’s aging and mortality, portraying the elderly mother with that intimacy and exclusive attention which literature usually reserves for the nubile young woman. In three poems in particular Dorcey is constructing a new poetic woman-woman relation: in “Trying on for Size” where the collection’s title phrase
occurs; in “Repossession” which draws on the motif of moving into maternal space; and in “When You’re Asleep,” the poem with which Part I concludes. In these pieces, Dorcey’s experimentation with the use of women’s talk as a poetic medium is finally and fully justified.

Each of the three poems is written from the perspective of a caring adult daughter, conscious of her mother’s physical decline and the imminence of her death. In each of them the daughter talks to her mother as she comments on her geriatric condition, so that the older woman is never objectified, is always given the dignity of a subject who is addressed. As addressee, the mother is the central focus of these poems, each of which unfolds in a conversational present tense. The language is plain and homely; the lines are short and almost bare of adjectives; the stanzas are uneven and seldom rhyme; contextualization is minimal. The effect is of an intense, direct emotional involvement between daughter and mother in which bonding is enacted through talking.

“Trying on for Size” opens in the elderly mother’s bedroom where she is caught embarrassingly in the act of pulling on her stockings in bed to save bending. Her privacy is invaded, her senile grotesquerie publicly displayed. She is again cast in an unheroic role as she descends the stairs, her “anxious, baby steps” prompting her skittish adult daughter to think of sliding her down the banister. Suddenly the comic scene is tragically reinterpreted. Domestic space assumes metaphysical dimensions as the hallway becomes a transitional passage between life and death and the procession of mother and daughters is metaphorized into a queue of women en route to the grave:

But you must take every step first
along this passage
we daughters follow after
each one of us
moving into the space
cleared by our mothers.

Death is contemplated from an exclusively female perspective in the closing lines:

And with what fine nerve,
what unthanked grace,
you confront this last world
you will discover before me.
I see your shy, jaunty smile
at the mirror—
see you say
what do you think?
As if death
were a foolish, extravagant hat
you were trying on for size.

Death is feminized, but not I think trivialized, by the image of a “foolish, extravagant hat”; indeed, this counterpointing of frivolity and fatality produces some of the same frisson as the speaker’s gossamer gown and tippet of tulle in Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop For Death.” The comparison between facing up to death and trying on “a foolish, extravagant hat” salutes the
mother’s understated bravery and derives its poignance from earlier happier uncertainties in her life. She is shown scaling down death’s magnitude, making light of its gravitas, banishing melodrama with a deprecating smile. Mary Dorcey situates her poem in a woman’s world; it begins and ends with a view of the mother dressing. Ordinary happenings relayed in ordinary language are made to convey intimations of mortality.

In “Repossession” the daughter resumes her dialogue with her mother, talking in matter-of-fact tones about aspects of a woman’s bodily history which, until recently, were rarely mentioned in poetry—hysterectomy, menopause. The elderly female body, so seldom seen in an ageist literature, is unflinchingly displayed:

You are stooped and frail
and thin
your fingers swollen
your knees don’t work.

No fine words drape the physical disabilities of old age.

In this poem which enacts the shocking recognition that daughters, too, age and die, the narrative strategy is to sever the umbilical relation until the surprise conclusion. The daughter-narrator represents herself as alert, practical, commonsensical, utterly different from her senile parent who lives in the past, locked in self-justifying “blather” with her dead mother whom she increasingly resembles. But with a surprising narrative twist, worthy of a short story, she is suddenly confronted with her mirror image and perceives that her mother’s reflection has replaced her own. The mirror, which in Lacanian terms initiates infant autonomy, here serves as a symbol of maternal repossession. The daughter’s face and fate reduplicate her mother’s.

“When You’re Asleep,” the poem with which the volume closes, is the finest instance of Dorcey’s deployment of talk as a poetic resource. The poem turns on the theme of a status reversal in daughter-mother relations: the aged mother reverting to early childhood, her visiting adult daughter acting the part of parent. Role reversal is enacted in the first instance entirely through the medium of speech. The opening stanzas are designed to trick the reader into assuming that she’s listening to the querulous tones of a harassed mother scolding a toddler:

I’m worn out with you.

All day long
fetching and carrying
upstairs and downstairs
my back broken
picking up after you
forever under my feet.

Upstairs downstairs
your questions trailing me
never quiet for two
minutes together—.
From the colloquial opening line onwards the tirade is plausibly that of an exhausted mum, and the actual relationship of speaker and addressee does not emerge until the third stanza, when the elderly mother’s voice is heard embarking on a series of reminiscences. Snippets of quotation economically suggest the tenor of her talk, creating an illusion of dialogue by introducing each reminiscence with a question, or when this ploy fails, pleading for tolerance:

- How old were you the year that we went...?
- Do you remember the time
- somebody said...?
- Just let me tell you once more—
- I know I’ve told you already....

I have never seen an old woman’s garrulosity so protectively dramatized as in this poem, where through the strategy of role reversal it is interpreted with maternal indulgence. The visiting daughter recognizes that the opportunity to rattle on all day long is a “festival,” a “banquet” for the lonely woman, and her interventions are parentally solicitous, controlling but kindly:

- Eat up now
- stop talking
- your food will be cold...
- come on now—we’re late...
- get into bed
- it’s all hours already.

What she speaks is an “old litany,” the clichéd admonitions that signify motherly concern.

Dorcey revitalizes the stale metaphor of “second childhood,” using it to explore the changing relationship of emotional dependency between mother and daughter. The conclusion recalls the daughter’s youth when the mother was the dominant partner, unsentimentally stressing the complete turnabout in their association. Without once referring to the title phrase of the collection, the poem reveals its tragic import. Daughter-mother bonding is enacted through conversational tone and idiom. The daughter’s utterance is given immediacy and intimacy by the use of the present tense; it is as if the poem were talking itself into being. The ordinariness of the language increases the air of verisimilitude. Pacing and pausing are controlled by the short lines which introduce gaps for inaudible communication. The speaker invites and expects an empathetic listener who will fill in the blanks. Such representation of the humour and pathos, the tension and tedium, in the adult woman’s relationship with her aging mother touches a new poetic nerve.

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The fact that Dorcey is a matrilineal poet, haunted by the voices of her mother and grandmother, lends added poignance to “Daughter,” an apostrophe to the child she will never bear. The daughter addressed in this poem is a verbal construct with no referential dimension, yet she is conjured up as a physical presence, a little girl with “small, hot hand,” “green eyes,” “fat, buttery flesh,”
who will never grow up to rebellious adolescence or adulthood. A keen sense of emotional bonding is evoked through the tender tones of motherly speech:

My little daughter
what times we shall have—
what talks.

The poem’s mood oscillates between love and loss, and the homophobic prejudices which would deny motherhood to the lesbian are adverted to only in the closing lines:

I will leave you
my daughter
this whole wide world
that was not yet
wide enough for me
to bear you into.

This poem has a meta-literary maternal agenda which is relevant to Dorcey’s entire enterprise. To imagine the unimagined, to speak what has been unspoken, is to extend the known world, creating a space which a new generation of daughters may occupy and enjoy:

I will bequeath you
little—
some words
angry, loving, careful
set down to make a space for you.