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Heaney in love

by *Adam Kirsch*

On the love poetry of Seamus Heaney.

It may be too sweeping to say that modern poetry is unhappy poetry, but it is certainly true that modern poems about marriage are almost always about unhappy marriages. The catalogue might begin with the hopelessness of Hardy's "We Sat at the Window": "Wasted were two souls in their prime,/ And great was the waste, that July time/ When the rain came down." Then there is the panicky pillow-talk of "The Waste Land": "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?" And the sexual brutality of Lowell's "To Speak of Woe That Is In Marriage": "Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust …/ It's the injustice … he is so unjust—/ whiskey-blind, staggering home at five./ My only thought is how to keep alive." Nor do things look any better from a woman poet's point of view, whether we are listening to Marianne Moore, who never married—"the spiked hand/ that has an affection for one/ and proves it to the bone"—or to Sylvia Plath, who all too famously did: "You have a hole, it's a poultice./ You have an eye, it's an image./ My boy, it's your last resort./ Will you marry it, marry it, marry it." It's enough to make you wonder why the divorce rate isn't even higher.

To Lionel Trilling, nothing was more revealing of the "unhappy consciousness" of modern literature than this dread of marriage. From Shakespeare down to the nineteenth-century novelists, he pointed out, marriage was literature's chief symbol of "a condition of being that went by the name of happiness." The weddings that conclude Shakespeare's comedies, like the love-matches in Jane Austen, are promises that human life, despite its inevitable ending in death, is not essentially tragic, but capable of "order, peace, honor, and beauty." Such unanimous poetic testimony against the possibility of happy marriage, then, is more than a sign that poets are unusually difficult to be married to. It is a statement of the modern artist's belief that truthfulness to experience, especially the worst phases of experience, is more important than the promise of pleasure; that it is better to be authentic than to be happy.

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This is the proposition that Seamus Heaney's poetry has always argued against. He is one of the most beloved poets of his generation because he instinctively rejects the modernist equation of authenticity with unhappiness. It makes sense, then, that Heaney has been so consistently drawn to the subject of marriage. For in his unillusioned, at times ironical, but finally affirmative vision of marriage, as in so many aspects of his work, Heaney offers readers trained up in the canons of disillusion the seemingly obsolete hope that poetry can be on the side of life. "As writers and readers, as sinners and citizens, our realism and our aesthetic sense make us wary of crediting the positive note," he acknowledged in his 1995 Nobel lecture. Yet the title of that lecture is "Crediting Poetry," and he has always sought to overcome our wariness of extending credit to the positive—our tendency to equate credence with credulity.

If Heaney's poems are at times almost excessive in their musical richness—the relished consonants and vowels that are so easily parodiable, even at times by Heaney himself—that is because he strives to overwhelm the reader's defenses with delight. Only by making his language defiantly sensual can Heaney prove that poetry can accommodate "the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza," even while remaining committed to "the poet's truthfulness." "I follow into the mud," Heaney writes in "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," one of his many poems inspired by the political violence in Northern Ireland. Yet when he goes on to boast, "I am Hamlet the Dane,/ skull-handler, parablist,/ smeller of rot// in the state, infused/ with its poisons,/ pinioned by ghosts and affections," the dark agility of the lines makes its own kind of counterstatement: this is not the sound of mud but of "buoyancy."

Heaney is best known for poems like this one, haunted by Ireland's history and soil. Yet it is fitting that his selected poems, *Opened Ground*, is dedicated "To Marie"—the poet's wife since 1965—and not just for personal reasons. For the theme of marriage is as central to his poetry as Ireland and its ghosts, and no individual appears in his work so often as his wife. Most of Heaney's collections include two or three poems about her, and over the decades he has written about every phase of married life, from wedding and honeymoon through childrearing and the approach of old age. The very continuity of these poems, decade in and decade out, makes a statement. If marriage is, as Trilling suggested, the canary in the mine of modernism, the first victim of the poisons that surround us, Heaney's poems about marriage are designed to remind us that, even today, it can and does flourish.

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Heaney's marriage poems would not be so convincing, however, if they were unambivalently affirmative, a mere reiteration of the happy endings of Shakespeare's comedies. Here as throughout his work, Heaney responds to modernism dialectically, incorporating its harsh truths without succumbing to them. A wedding may be the conclusion of a comedy, he reminds us, but it is only the beginning of a marriage; and because Heaney conceives of marriage as a trial that can be failed, he enters into it in a spirit that is anything but carefree. There can be few less joyous epithalamiums than "Wedding Day," from his 1972 collection *Wintering Out*, whose first line is "I am afraid," and which depicts a ceremony more like a funeral than a wedding:

> Why all those tears,
> The wild grief on his face
> Outside the taxi? The sap
> Of mourning rises
> In our waving guests.

When, after all this, Heaney concludes with the plea, "Let me/ Sleep on your breast to the airport," he sounds less like a man embarking on a honeymoon than like a patient who has just come through a dangerous operation. It is remarkable, in fact, that Heaney's earliest marriage poems, written closest in time to his wedding, are the most saturated with anxiety. Not until much later is he able to look back fondly on his courtship.

The reason is Heaney's precocious sense of responsibility, which would do so much to shape the rigorously ethical poems he wrote in response to the Troubles. In the poems of *North* (1975), written in a country divided politically and religiously, Heaney always seeks balance, as though the poet were the fulcrum on which the scales of history must rest. He struggles with the duty neither to go to extremes nor to forget the extreme—"hung in the scales/ with beauty and atrocity," as he writes in "The Grauballe Man." In order to keep those scales steady, Heaney imposes on himself a great imaginative tension, for which he finds metaphor after metaphor. In "Singing School," he evokes the exiled Ovid when he describes himself "weighing and weighing/ My responsible *tristia*." In the late poem "St. Kevin and the Blackbird," he sympathizes with the saint who allowed a bird to build its nest in his outstretched hand, and so had to keep his arm steady "like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks." "Imagine being Kevin," Heaney asks the reader. "Which is he?/ Self-forgetful or in agony all the time … ?" In "Weighing In," the sight of a "56 lb. weight" reminds him of "The principle of bearing, bearing up/ And bearing out, just having to/ Balance the intolerable in others/ Against our own… ."

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Irish history may have compelled Heaney to experience the fullness of that "agony," but the need to test his own balance, to endure "whatever we settled for and settled into," is also native to his character. And it emerges most clearly in his poems about marriage, where the virtues of balance and patience are tested even more acutely than in politics. His first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, appeared in 1966, before violence had taken over Ireland's public life. Yet in "Poem," which bears the dedication "for Marie," Heaney already invokes the images of "bearing up and bearing out" that would mark his political poetry. Addressing his "love," Heaney remembers his first, childish efforts at building restraints—"the wall/ That was to keep out sow and pecking hen" from his garden, the "bastions of clay and mush" he used to "dam the flowing drain." But the wall and the dam were badly built, and they failed to separate order from chaos. Marriage, too, the poem concludes, is a matter of "small imperfect limits," and the poet throws himself on his wife's mercy, asking her to do what he could not: "Within new limits now, arrange the world/ And square the circle: four walls and a ring."

The conceit of that last line, invoking the four walls of a house and a wedding ring, is undeniably elegant. But it is also a little forlorn, even menacing, as though marriage were a prison. To another kind of writer—a more common kind—the correct response to such a prison would be to plan a break-out. We are used to the cliché that the creative imagination loathes constraint, so that the serial divorces of great writers become simply the expression of their thirst for freedom. Heaney, much more interestingly, sees marriage not as a jail but as a fortress—a strong place one wants to stay inside, not to escape. As always, he sees construction and preservation as more valuable, and more aesthetically challenging, than destruction.

That is why Heaney's most dramatic marriage poems are about moments of strain and alienation, when it seems that the "four walls and a ring" might be about to crumble. Heaney never engages in the sort of self-exposure Robert Lowell risked in "The Dolphin": he never reveals the concrete reasons for a marital quarrel. Instead, he prefers the dignity of metaphor, which allows him to write about marriage's strains without violating its privacy. And he shows, in a poem like "Summer Home," that indirection can be as effective as confession:

> Was it wind off the dumps
> Or something in heat
>
> dogging us, the summer gone sour,
> a fouled nest incubating somewhere?

Whose fault, I wondered, inquisitor
of the possessed air.

To realize suddenly,
whip off the mat

that was larval, moving—
and scald, scald, scald.

The hints of "something in heat" and "a fouled nest," followed by the violent purgation of the last line, make clear enough what kind of festering transgression Heaney is writing about. This combination of force and delicacy is characteristic of the way he treats lust, whose lawlessness is a threat to all "limits." Not just Heaney's attitude towards sexual desire, but the rhetorical techniques he uses to write about it reflect a principled wariness. It is a matter of tact with him almost never to confess to illicit desire in his own person. He prefers to write about it in parables, such as "The Outlaw," a poem about "an unlicensed bull" who is paid to mate with a cow: "Then an awkward, unexpected jump, and/ His knobbled forelegs straddling her flank,/ He slammed life home, impassive as a tank,/ Dropping off like a tipped-off load of sand." Heaney's language reduces male lust to pure inertia, a natural force indifferent to its object. Another parable is the Frost-like monologue "Shore Woman," in which male desire is once again objectified as a lumbering animal, this time a porpoise:

those sloped oily backs
Propelled towards us: I lay and screamed
Under splashed brine in an open rocking boat,
Feeling each dunt and slither through the timber,
Sick at their huge pleasures in the water.

The "huge pleasures," the near-obscenity of "dunt," make clear what these menacing creatures represent in the woman's mind.

"Shore Woman" points to what might have become a limitation of Heaney's understanding of desire. By casting it as a specifically masculine threat to the stability of marriage, his rhetoric in these early poems makes it difficult to effectively imagine female desire. Coming from a still-puritanical Irish Catholic culture, Heaney was certainly vulnerable to this kind of limitation—of confusing wife with mother, one might say. And it is true that Heaney has a strong susceptibility to images of motherhood: his poems about his own mother are some of his most moving, and he writes on several occasions about his wife's experience of childbirth. "A Pillowed Head," from *Seeing Things* (1991), finds in her labor another version of his old subject, the ordeal willingly borne:

That this time you too were half-grateful
The pangs had begun—prepared
And clear-headed, foreknowing

The trauma, entering on it
With full consent of the will.

Given all this, it must be accounted one of the great strengths of Heaney's marriage poems that he writes so convincingly about mutual desire—of wife for husband as well as husband for wife. It seems to have taken Heaney some time to grow comfortable with this notion, in his poetry at least. He even seems to offer, in "The Otter," a parable of his own sexual education within marriage. The poem begins with a memory of a long-ago trip to Tuscany, perhaps on the poet's honeymoon, and of his wife's pleasure in swimming: "I loved your wet head and smashing crawl,/ Your fine swimmer's back and shoulders." He himself, however, refused to get in the water, in what seems like a case of inhibition: "I sat dry-throated on the warm stones./ You were beyond me." But in time, Heaney writes, the "thinned and disappointed" husband learned to share his wife's liquid pleasures:

Thank God for the slow loadening:
When I hold you now
We are close and deep
As the atmosphere on water.

Time, Heaney suggests, is the true element of marriage. Only the passage of years ("This year and every year since") makes possible the trust and intimacy the poem celebrates. That intimacy is what licenses the affectionate joke of the title: his aging wife, Heaney writes, looks like an otter coming out of the pool, "Heavy and frisky in your freshened pelt,/ Printing the stones." This is not the kind of image a lover would use to woo his beloved, or that the anxious bridegroom of "Poem" would have ventured. It does not flatter but teases, in the way happily married couples often do.

Heaney uses the same kind of endearment in what is probably his best-known marriage poem, "The Skunk." Here we see the poet separated from his wife, writing home to her from California: "After eleven years I was composing/ Love-letters again." While at his desk, he watches a skunk that appears "night after night" in front of his window. For just a moment, Heaney allows the reader to suspect that this skunk represents some sexual temptation, ostentatiously "paraded" in his face, making him "tense as a voyeur."

But the poem banishes this implication as soon as it appears; for the tense shifts, and we realize that this episode of separation lies in the past, that the poet is in fact back home with his wife: "It all came back to me last night." And this reunion was never in doubt, Heaney implies, because the sexual allure of the skunk is not a threat to his wife, but a quality she shares. In the playful last

stanza, she becomes a kind of skunk herself: “Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer/ For the black plunge-line nightdress.” Sex, Heaney suggests, does not have to be warded off as a threat to marriage, because it can be incorporated into marriage itself, in the happy eroticism of husband and wife. This, too, is one of the blessings of a long marriage, as Heaney suggests in a reverent metaphor: “broaching the word ‘wife’/ Like a stored cask,” containing a wine that improves with age.

“The Skunk,” in its symbolic drama of reunion and affirmation, is also inevitably a rebuke of the most famous English poem about skunks, Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour.” Heaney even seems to be addressing Lowell directly when he describes the “Ordinary, mysterious skunk,/ Mythologized, demythologized”; for no poet has mythologized the animal as Lowell did when he made it a symbol of obstinate endurance. Heaney’s sly deflation of Lowell, in fact, is suggestive of his whole approach to poetry: he would rather affirm ironically than despair heroically. This essentially moral principle is as central to his poems of marriage as to his political poetry, and in both contexts, it helps to make Heaney one of the most trustworthy poets of our time.

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