The Chemistry of Love Poetry

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Introduction

One of several ways in which C. S. Lewis will be remembered is as the scholar who turned an emotion into a literary tradition. Lewis’s famous declaration that romantic love was actually an invention of certain poets writing in eleventh-century Provence was nothing if not provocative, and was still causing a degree of irritation as late as 1972, when Jon Stallworthy cited the work of Ernst Peter Dronke against him in his introduction to The Penguin Book of Love Poetry. Given that Dronke detected ‘the feeling of amour courtois’ in traditions as diverse as the Skaldic poetry of tenth-century Iceland, the folk poetry of Georgia, and hieroglyphics from ‘Egypt of the second millennium BC’, and given that ‘there is no suggestion of a single torch, kindled in “the dark backward and abysm of time”, being passed from one civilization to another’, Stallworthy concluded ‘that feelings of passionate love’ have actually been ‘common to all mankind’, kindling ‘poets of different periods and places . . . by a process of internal combustion’.2

Lewis had, in truth, already disowned his conception of love as ‘an almost purely literary phenomenon’ a few years before the publication of Dronke’s research,3 a recantation that itself caricatured the position he had reached in The Allegory of Love, which – when we look at it again – now appears less dogmatic than its reputation might have us believe. The famous declaration is actually hedged with qualifications and

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1 See The Allegory of Love (Oxford 1936) p. 2.
3 This following his own experience of a relationship in the late 1950s. See The Four Loves (London 1960) p. 102.

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uncertainty: ‘French poets, in the eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were first to express, that Romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth’ (Allegory, p. 4). Lewis’s reluctance to settle on one of those three verbs leaves open much room for debate. His doubt as to whether the ‘Romantic species of passion’ is literary invention or universal human condition, a product of culture or nature, has since been shared by many commentators, but the weight of evidence now appears to fall on the side of nature. Standing in the opposite corner of the ring to Lewis is perhaps the most eminent contemporary historian of love, Irving Singer, who concludes that ‘love is a universal tendency among human beings’. Such a comment is bound to arouse the suspicions of those conditioned to pounce on anything declared to be essential condition rather than cultural or linguistic product, but Singer is not alone in his beliefs, which perhaps find their strongest supporting evidence from outside of his primary sources of information (literature and philosophy), from the fields of psychology, anthropology, evolutionary biology, and neurophysiology. Stallworthy’s ‘process of internal combustion’ might not get us very far in our attempt to disclose the mechanisms of passion, but research into the physiological manifestations and possible evolutionary function of love suggests that his metaphor does at least point in the right direction. In the light of some fascinating recent discoveries about the neurochemical environment generated by passion, I want first in this essay to outline the nature of the ‘internal combustion’ of love, revealing romantic passion to be at root a physiological mechanism that exists as a potentiality within all human beings, one that has evolved to fulfil an important role in the production and the survival of offspring.

Love was not born out of poetry, then, but it may be the case that poetry was born out of love. As so many Valentine’s Day cards testify, poems (of whatever quality) are the cultural product most intimately associated with romance. Just as love apparently transcends time and circumstance, so love poetry from diverse cultures displays consistent features: close literary analogues of the ‘highly specialised’ sort of code that Lewis traced back to eleventh-century Languedoc actually crop up all over the world in any century you care to mention (Allegory, p. 2). Evolutionary theory can shed light on this also. In his book The Mating Mind, Geoffrey Miller proposes that human artistic creativity evolved as marker of intelligence, with a facility for linguistic play being particularly indicative of genetic calibre. Love poetry could therefore be seen as an

artistic product that provides us with a particularly intimate link to the very foundations of human creativity. Having said that, it does appear that this sub-genre has undergone, over the last 150 years or so, a development that Miller’s theory apparently fails to anticipate. Most writers on love – whether cultural transmitters or universalists – would concur with Denis de Rougemont’s assertion that ‘what stirs lyric poets into their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion’. Passion – as we shall see – is a neurochemically distinct phenomenon, different not only in intensity but also in kind from the bond of attachment associated with ‘the settled couple’. And yet since the mid-nineteenth century there has been an increasing tendency, at least in the West, to write about this bond of attachment, resulting in what Patricia Ball has termed the ‘poetry of relationships’. This is verse apparently inspired less by passion – what de Rougemont also labels eros – and more by agape: a Christian vision of altruistic, marital love which offers the consolation of ‘fruitful contentment’ on earth rather than the erotic lure of metaphysical union or transcendence of souls (see Love in the Western World, pp. 64–9). Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Coventry Patmore found that the ideology of the Christian marriage, the happy family, and emotional fidelity in mourning – all powerfully embodied by Britain’s longest-reigning monarch – provided a rich source of artistic material, not to mention a receptive middle-class readership. More recently there has been a veritable epidemic of ‘dangerous constancy’ in poetry (as Donne has Venus call it in ‘The Indifferent’), with notable examples including elegiac sequences by Thomas Hardy (‘Poems of 1912–1913’), Douglas Dunn (Elegies) and Ted Hughes (Birthday Letters), and marital accounts by D. H. Lawrence (Look! We Have Come Through), William Carlos Williams (Journey to Love), Craig Raine (History: The Home Movie), Eavan Boland (Against Love Poetry) and Seamus Heaney (throughout his work, as discussed below). Oddly enough, even the modern love poet least touched by this ideology and most notoriously associated with the agonies of erotic passion – Robert Graves – turns out to have written several authentic poems of attachment as well.

On the face of it, this modern ‘poetry of relationships’ seems anomalous, and not only because it is unfaithful to Lewis’s notorious third identifying mark of courtly love (that is, adultery): it also transgresses against the evolutionary theory which is able to comprehend passionate love poetry

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6 Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World (Princeton 1983) p. 15.
in the context of the courtship effort and the early stages of child-rearing, but sees little reason for its continuing production within a fully established, long-term relationship. Accounting for this poetry would, then, seem to lead us back from the realms of nature to those of nurture, which obviously shapes the ways in which we utilise our genetic facility for linguistic expression. But having said that, one has to recognise that it’s not easy to buck evolution. As Helen Fisher notes, the lure of passionate love is evaded more readily in theory than it is in practice;\(^8\) if you look closely enough, the most superficially respectable and placid of ‘marital’ love poems can conceal disruptively passionate undercurrents, or – to borrow Patmore’s phrase – some ‘hidden Eros’ lurking within. I want to illustrate this in the last part of my essay by looking at poems by two laureates of conjugal love: first Patmore, and then Heaney, a writer who has produced a steady stream of love poems since the publication of his first book forty years ago, and whose original contribution to this sub-genre deserves greater recognition.

Universal Love

C. S. Lewis’s assertion that passionate love should be regarded more as cultural invention than universal human condition found considerable support from the field of psychology during the twentieth century. Freud placed sexuality at the heart of his enquiry but wrote relatively little on love, a phenomenon which – according to his one-time student Theodore Reik – he essentially saw as a ‘goal-inhibited form of the sex drive’.\(^9\) This view of romance as a by-product of the need to restrain sexual expression, with all its potential for social disruption, certainly helps to account for the pervasiveness of love: the overwhelming majority of civilisations develop such mechanisms for communal harmony; however, it does not necessarily indicate universality, as it is possible at least to conceive of cultures wherein sexual expression is so seamlessly woven into the social fabric that no such repression, and hence no concept of love (as Freud understood the term), is necessary. Such a brave new world was envisaged in fiction by Aldous Huxley; in 1971, anthropologist Donald Marshall thought that he had found the real thing on the remote Polynesian island of Mangaia. Marshall’s research into the apparently promiscuous sexual habits of the natives (both male and female) in this peaceful

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community lead him to conclude that this society was lacking any concept of what we would understand as romantic love.\textsuperscript{10} These findings seemed to confirm the position already reached by Reik, who may have regarded Freud’s conception of love as too simplistic, but nevertheless grounded his own thesis on the assumption that love was ‘decidedly a product of culture’ (Of Love and Lust, p. 8). Others in this field have since gone one step further, arguing that the culture most often associated with romantic love – the modern Western world – should be regarded as the historical exception rather than as the rule. Robert Endleman writes that ‘something like our Western conception of love, though not entirely absent, seems to be rare in ... tribal or transitional societies. And certainly it is not generally normatively required or expected, or considered a desideratum of the good life. And even rarer is “romantic love” as reality, or as expectation or ideal.’ The combination of italics and speech marks here places the whole concept very much in doubt.\textsuperscript{11}

There is, however, no longer any consensus amongst psychologists on this subject; indeed, it is probable that those who see love as culturally determined are now outnumbered by universalists. The implicit answer to the question posed by the book entitled Romantic Passion: A Universal Experience? is clearly ‘Yes’: love, the editor of this volume argues, ‘is a potent potential experience regardless of the presence or absence of specific cultural institutions or child-rearing practices. In effect, it is a human universal’.\textsuperscript{12} Anthropologist Helen Harris provides perhaps the most telling evidence for this position in the book, her own research on Mangaia revealing that island to be less of a promiscuous paradise than Marshall had made out. Folk-tales, oral history, and the language itself provide Harris with evidence that a concept at least similar to romantic love pre-dated contact with Western culture there; interviews with the oldest members of Mangaian society revealed telltale characteristics that have been classified as universal indicators of love: namely, the desire for emotional union with the loved one; idealisation of the loved one; exclusivity; intrusive thinking about the loved one; emotional

dependency; a reordering of motivational hierarchies; and empathy with the loved one.\(^\text{13}\) Harris’s list has much in common with one compiled by psychologist Dorothy Tenov following her pioneering survey of experiences of love in America, research that led her to regard romantic love as a ‘remarkably tenacious, involuntary’ phenomenon that is less ‘cultural invention’ than ‘biologically determined human reaction’.\(^\text{14}\)

Inconsistencies in Theodore Reik’s own work can now be seen to anticipate the main source of challenge to those who would conceive of love as a product of nurture rather than nature, for although near the start of his discussion he summarily dismisses the idea that love might be ‘a biological need’ (‘because there are millions of people who do not feel it and many centuries and cultural patterns in which it is unknown’), towards the end he reintroduces this possibility by acknowledging that the ‘emotional differences between the sexes that are the results of sociological and cultural factors also have their deepest roots in biological divergency’ (\textit{Of Love and Lust}, pp. 19, 423). The problem for Reik was that, in the 1940s, it was impossible to ‘name any inner secretions or specific glands’ which were ‘responsible for [love]’ (p. 19). Almost half a century later, this naming process began. Noting similarities between the symptoms of passion and the effects of certain psychoactive substances, Michael Liebowitz deduced that love should be regarded less as a psychological condition than as a physiological process driven by changes in our neurochemical balance.\(^\text{15}\) Liebowitz was particularly interested in the euphoric effects of the endogenous amphetamine-like substance phenylethylamine, but since the advent of functional magnetic resonance image (fMRI) scanning – technology that allows researchers to identify specific areas of activity within the brain – other neurotransmitters have come to the centre of attention. Late in the 1990s two teams of researchers, working independently of each other on different sides of the Atlantic, had the idea of putting people who had recently fallen passionately in love through an fMRI scanner. The results of these experiments confirmed Liebowitz’s hypothesis that passionate love should be seen as a distinct neurochemically-mediated state of being: in both cases, subjects consistently exhibited


\(^{15}\) Liebowitz, \textit{The Chemistry of Love} (Boston 1983).
elevated activity in areas of the brain with most receptors for dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters that are also stimulated by drugs such as cocaine, and are associated with states of exhilaration, obsessive attention, and goal-oriented behaviour. Fisher conjectured that being in love might also be linked to reduced levels of serotonin, the activity of which tends to decline as dopamine levels rise, producing symptoms of depressive agitation and obsessive thinking.  

Being able to show that a group of contemporary Westerners experience passion in pretty much the same way is not in itself enough to confirm love as a universal, of course: perhaps these neurochemical events are themselves prompted by a shared socio-cultural milieu? What led Fisher to regard passionate love as a universal was not so much the fact that neurotransmitters were firing, or even which neurotransmitters were firing, but where this brain activity was occurring. Psychologists Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon have similarly argued that love should be seen as a human universal sourced in brain chemistry, but where they focus on that part of the brain uniquely developed in mammals – the limbic system – in order to define this experience, the fMRI scans drew Fisher’s attention elsewhere. The regions most significantly lit up by passionate love – namely the caudate nucleus and the ventral tegmental area – both lie near the brain’s core, belonging to its most primitive area, known as the ‘reptilian brain or R-complex’ (see Why We Love, p. 69). Where the limbic system processes emotions and empathetic interaction, the R-complex is primarily concerned with the basics of survival: the maintenance of body temperature, for example, or sensations of thirst and hunger. It is the area that generates what Donald Pfaff has classified as ‘drives’: instinctive motivations towards the fulfilment of fundamental biological needs (Why We Love, p. 74). The discovery of consistent patterns of activity in this part of the brains of her subjects led Fisher to the surprising conclusion that – at least in its early, passionate manifestation – love is not an ‘emotion’ at all, but a motivation, a potentiality possessed not only by all humans, but theoretically by other species too (Why We Love, pp. 26–50). That seductive individual in the lounge may actually be a lizard after all.  

18 Unlike Freud or Reik, but like Tennov, Fisher distinguishes the drive of passionate love from lust, arguing that the two involve different configurations of brain chemistry. See Why We Love, pp. 77–98, esp. 243 n. 10.
In his celebrated 116th sonnet, Shakespeare compares ideal love to

an ever fixed marke
That lookes on tempests and is never shaken:
It is the star to every wandering barke
Whose worths unknown, although his hight be taken

Plato would have recognised this vision of love ‘shining in company with the celestial forms’, as he describes it in the *Phaedrus*; or in the *Symposium*, an ‘intermediate between the divine and the mortal’ that provides a constant point of orientation, and yet is ultimately ‘sourced in and hence indefinable’, unknowable to those whose eyes are ‘clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life’. 19

A great deal of speculation on love through the ages has either commenced or concluded with the admission that the essence of this particular phenomenon may finally be beyond our ken; however, the identification of a distinct set of neurochemical circumstances associated with passion has gone a long way towards taking love out of the realms of metaphysics and philosophy, and into the compass of science. The branch of science that most convincingly accounts for the existence and function of this drive is evolutionary biology. Tennov had predicted in 1979 that the search to understand the nature and function of love would be guided by Darwin (see *Love and Limerance*, pp. 241–54); two years later Sydney Mellen was the first to try and follow this lead: ‘The primary reason why men and women of today have a tendency to love each other is that among their early ancestors the rudiments of such a tendency made an essential contribution to the survival of children’. 20

This view of love as a universal product of human evolution helps to account for the defining characteristics recognised by both Harris on Mangaia and Tennov in the USA. Intrusive thinking, the longing for reciprocation, the intensification of love through adversity and a general intensity of feeling are all neurochemically mediated experiences that have evolved to put proximity and reproduction, by default, at the top of our list of priorities. As Frank Tallis has recognised, the instinct to survive and reproduce takes on a distinctive character in a species notable for its unique capacity for reason and self-reflection: the lover’s tendency to interpret all acts favourably and to idealize the loved one (both recognised

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by Tennov) reflect the irrationality of this ‘necessary madness’, as the pressing demands of the R-complex temporarily short-circuit the limbic system’s network of emotional ties and override the rational controls of the neo-cortex. Such factors distinguish passion from lust most clearly when they are combined with the most fundamental of all defining qualities of this kind of love: that is, exclusivity. As Tennov discovered, truly passionate lovers really do only have eyes for each other, an intense focus of attention that appears to have evolved because the species depends not only on reproduction but also on the viability of offspring, with the exclusivity of passion improving the dependent child’s chances of surviving its vulnerable first months and years.

Passion and Poetry

Denis de Rougemont regarded the ‘cultivation of passionate love’ in Western literature as ‘a reaction to Christianity (and in particular to its doctrine of marriage) by people whose spirit, whether naturally or by inheritance, was still pagan’ (Love in the Western World, p. 74). I want to say more about the strained relationship between marriage and literature in the latter half of this essay, but it is first worth recognising that, for de Rougemont, passion reflects what are essentially Platonic aspirations: in both Phaedrus and Symposium, Socrates portrays love as a means towards the end of union with ideal beauty. The dramatic mood swings associated with this kind of love – between elation and despair, fevered anticipation and hopelessness – might, in this context at least, be regarded as spiritual aspirations and disappointments, as the desire for transcendence through mystical union is, in various ways, but invariably, thwarted. De Rougemont’s model of Western love is essentially one of cultural transmission, then, but it is interesting that (like Lewis before him) he hesitates regarding the ultimate source of passion: were these reluctant converts drawn to such pagan enthusiasms ‘naturally or by inheritance’? Evolutionary theory argues that passion ought to be regarded as something a little more organic than a ‘notion of love ... abroad in the world’ (Love in the Western World, p. 17), and it now seems clear that – at its base – this is not so much a literary invention as an evolved universal drive.

De Rougemont is right, however, to emphasise the connection between passion and literature, and this is one thing that advocates of cultural and

evolutionary transmission can agree on. Extant love poems from ancient Sumer allow us to trace this sub-genre back to the very birth of writing:

Man of my heart, my beloved man,
your allure is a sweet thing, as sweet as honey.
Lad of my heart, my beloved man,
your allure is a sweet thing, as sweet as honey.
You have captivated me,
of my own free will I will come to you.
Man, let me flee with you – into the bedroom.
You have captivated me;
of my own free will I shall come to you.
Lad, let me flee with you – into the bedroom.  

Such frank testimony of female desire reminds us that different civilisations will each offer their own culturally determined perspective on love, and it is interesting to speculate on how far what can be said also determines what can be felt. However, local colour should not mask the striking similarities found in love poems from around the world, similarities that go well beyond the universal expression of basic sexual desire. The ‘internal combustion’ of passion, for example, appears to take place in the same part of the body whether you are a Sumerian woman, or an Egyptian:

My heart runs out if I think how I love him,
I can’t just think like anyone else.
It, my heart, is all out of place
It won’t let me choose a dress
or hide back of my fan.
I can’t put on my eye make-up
or pick a perfume.

or a privileged citizen of sixth-century BC Lesbos:

As a whirlwind
swoops on an oak
Love shakes my heart

a Sri Lankan living during the first two centuries AD:

Where is my lord, my support?
The space between my breasts
has become empty
like a great pond
where white herons
with black legs search
for prey.

a man writing in thirteenth-century India:

when the fire
of love catches in the heart
it goes up in flames like a grass hut
no one’s
wisdom then can tell right from wrong

or a young Romantic poet in nineteenth-century England:

I could not see a single thing,
Words from my eyes did start –
They spoke as chords do from the string,
And blood burnt round my heart.24

There is no convoluted line of cultural transmission here, and it might be noted that, where philosophers and psychologists have often seen love as a matter of thoughts and concepts, poets from around the world tend to describe it as a matter of the body, recording its physical symptoms. Their instinctive recognition that passionate love is a physiological as well as psychological experience accords with our growing understanding of this phenomenon as a universal drive: just as hunger gnaws

at the belly and the need for warmth causes one to shiver, so love
shakes the heart. 25

Passion has its physical manifestations, then, but it also prompts us into
conscious activity; as we can see, the writing of poems is such an activity.
If cultural transmission does not lie at the base of this connection, then
what does? Sydney Mellen drew on The Origin of Species to comprehend
human love as a product of natural selection – a survival tool; in his book
The Mating Mind, Geoffrey Miller looks to Darwin’s later masterpiece –
The Descent of Man – to understand the link between love and artistic
expression. Noting the key point that we are descended not only from
those who survived, but also from those who were deemed desirable
enough to breed successfully, Miller argues that ‘our minds evolved not
just as survival machines, but as courtship machines’ (Mating Mind, p. 3).

These machines are designed to select mates with characteristics that give
a greater probability of genetic transmission, and where Homo Sapiens is
concerned, this appears to mean better brains: the species evolved a
greatly developed neo-cortex (76 per cent of its total volume, compared to
55–60 per cent for monkeys), the region dedicated to sophisticated func-
tions such as fine motor movements, conscious thought, reasoning, and –
most importantly of all – linguistic communication. Selection therefore
favoured partners with brain as well as brawn to pass on, and with the
words to convey their abilities, and it is this that provides Miller with the
‘missing link’ between passion and poetry: he argues that artistic creativity,
the apparent superfluity of which makes it hard to fully account for as a
survival tool, evolved primarily through sexual selection as a ‘fitness indi-
cator’, as a marker of neo-cortical development, of intelligence:

From an evolutionary point of view, the fundamental challenge facing
artists is to demonstrate their fitness by making something that lower-
fitness competitors could not make, thus proving themselves more
socially and sexually attractive… Beauty conveys truth, but not the
way we thought. Aesthetic significance does not deliver truth about
the human condition in general: it delivers truth about the condition
of a particular human, the artist. (Mating Mind, pp. 281–2)

25 Modern medical science provides further evidence that this may be more
than just the metaphorical seat of passionate love: it is now recognised that the
heart is rich in cells that communicate via the same neurotransmitters as are
present in the brain, hence disturbances in the balance of such neurotransmitters
are likely to effect the functioning of this organ. In traditional Chinese medicine,
the heart is associated with an emotion commonly translated as ‘joy’, but more
accurately labelled ‘enthusiasm’, with passionate love being one of its most
extreme manifestations.
Miller’s gesture to the final lines of the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ indicates that he has one of the most challenging and sophisticated of artistic forms on his mind here: he comes to the view that ‘constraints make poetry more impressive than prose as a display of verbal intelligence and creativity’ (p. 379). Poetry is the genre that, in its linguistic complexity, most convincingly displays the health and development of its maker’s neo-cortex – what Keats in another poem describes as ‘the wreathed trellis of a working brain’. The ability to fashion a complex ode, a fluent and seductive sestina, or a compelling sequence of sonnets, could be seen, then, as the human equivalent of the peacock’s tail: a beguiling and apparently superfluous display that sexual selection accounts for as an indicator of the ‘true fitness’ (p. 124) of the individual (as so few individuals have the resources necessary to carry it off successfully). Thus our facility and predilection for artistic creativity, including poetry, evolved through the sexual selection of those who could display greater sophistication and intellectual ability, hence had the best brains and – in a species that relies on its intelligence more than any other – were most likely to survive and pass on their genes. According to this model, the *ne plus ultra* of literary evolution must be Cyrano de Bergerac, and it is no coincidence that this historical figure has swelled into a worldwide archetype, the potency of which shows no sign of flagging.

De Bergerac recognised poetry to be the quintessential art of seduction, but this, of course, is not to say that all skilled poets are consciously advertising the fitness of their genes, that poetry is invariably part of some sophisticated chat-up plan. Even where love poetry is concerned, frank wooing is surprisingly rarely encountered: ‘Come live with me and be my love’ stands out as exception rather than rule; the ‘Persuasions’ section in *The Penguin Book of Love Poetry* is considerably smaller than the ‘Desolations’ section. But as the courtly lovers well knew, sophisticated accounts of desolation are more likely to win favour than crude attempts at seduction. In fact, the least likely of poetic sub-genres can serve an evolutionary purpose: for example, those who could memorise sagas or recount epic tales of heroism in battle were undoubtedly bathed in reflected glory, admired for their rare skills as story-tellers, enjoyed raised status within their peer group, and hence bettered their chances of leaving progeny gifted with similar abilities. Miller makes the basic point:

Because humans are fascinated by many things, courtship displays can successfully appeal to human interests by talking about almost anything under the sun. This Darwinian account of poetry does not drain poetry of its meaning – on the contrary, it shows why its
meaning is free to range over the entirety of human experience.
(Mating Mind, p. 381)

Having said this, he also notes that ‘in most cultures a substantial proportion of poetry is love poetry’ (p. 380), and – as the Sumerian evidence testifies – it is probably the case that this pervasive sub-genre provides us with our most intimate link to the universal origins of art. Peter L. Allen has described love poetry as ‘one of the most stable genres in Western literary history’.26 We need not restrict this to the West, and might now argue that such stability reflects a common set of physiological conditions evolved over millions of years to ensure the survival of the species. As time goes by, it is the writer of love lyrics who reminds us that the fundamental things still apply.

The Poetry of Attachment?

In ‘The Tower’, W. B. Yeats asks ‘Does the imagination dwell the most | Upon a woman won or woman lost?’ Denis de Rougemont’s answer to this question is indicated by his aphoristic assertion that ‘happy love has no history’ (Love in the Western World, p. 15). According to de Rougemont, poets have had comparatively little to say about the ‘woman won’ or the pleasures of coupledom because modern Western literature was born to record passion, and ‘passion and marriage are essentially irreconcilable’ (p. 277). On this point, at least, Darwin might have concurred. The theory of sexual selection indicates that passion evolved to focus our attentions exclusively on one partner for long enough to produce and raise viable offspring, but evolution being ‘parsimonious’ (as Frank Tallis puts it) ‘we fall in love for as long as it is necessary to achieve evolutionary goals, but no longer’ (Love Sick, p. 85). Debate continues as to the maximum life-span of requited passionate love: Tallis ‘recognises an upper limit of seven years (coinciding with the anecdotal ‘seven-year itch’)’ (p. 85); Fisher is less ambitious, arguing that, ‘as a rule’, passion lasts ‘only long enough to rear a single child through infancy – about four years’ (Why We Love, p. 134; her italics). Whichever is the case, passion does seem to come with programmed obsolescence. Irving Singer may promote the idea of ‘marital passion’ (see The Nature of Love, pp. 379–81), and Fisher give advice on how to make romance last, but these are the least convincing aspects of their discussions,27 testifying more to a pervasive cultural

27 ‘Make a point of doing novel and exciting things together’, Fisher suggests (Why We Love, p. 206).
aspiration than to reality. The truth was revealed by the fMRI scans: those subjects who had been in longer relationships showed less activity in the r-complex, the area concerned with fundamental drives and motivations, and more in the limbic system, the area concerned with the processing of emotions and the consolidation of memories (see Why We Love, pp. 69–73). Such a neurophysiological pattern reflects a common shift from passion towards another kind of love that Fisher labels attachment: where the former is, as we have seen, a short-lived drive associated with successful reproduction, the latter accompanies longer-term relationships, and appears to be governed by different evolutionary and cultural pressures.

Miller’s account of declining verbal courtship effort in human partnerships may be somewhat reductive (not to mention disenchanting), but it does help to account for the comparative scarcity of ‘marital’ love poetry:

If it took a million words to establish a sexual relationship with you, your boyfriend was apparently willing to absorb those costs, just as his male ancestors were. But if it takes only twenty words a day to maintain exclusive sexual access to you, why should he bother uttering more? His motivational system has evolved to deploy his courtship effort where it makes a difference to his reproductive success – mainly by focusing it where it improves his rate of sexual intercourse. Men apparently did not evolve from male ancestors who squandered high levels of verbal courtship effort on already-established relationships. (Mating Mind, pp. 382–3)

It might be noted in support of this theory that the apparent irreconcilability of poetry and marriage is not only a Western phenomenon: Moussaieff Masson, for example, writes that, although ‘it is fair to say that Sanskrit poetry lives off love’, ‘verses on married love’ are ‘rare’ in this tradition (The Peacock’s Egg, pp. 28, 29). When one does cast about for celebrated examples of marital verse the poems that spring most readily to mind turn out to be less records of long-term attachment than ones of engagement and nuptial celebration (for example, the Epithalamia tradition from Sappho, through Spenser and Donne, to Patmore), or reflections on marriage coloured by bereavement (for example, King’s ‘Exequy on his Wife’, Milton’s ‘Methought I saw my late espoused saint’, Hardy’s ‘Poems of 1912–1913’ and most recently Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters).

Yet Patricia Ball and Kerry McSweeney have argued that a significant change did occur within this sub-genre during the nineteenth century, as cultural and philosophical developments in Victorian Britain led a number of poets to write about long-term love relationships as they existed
within specific social contexts. \(^{28}\) No one has been more closely associated with this new poetry of attachment than Coventry Patmore, author of the nuptial celebration \textit{par excellence}, \textit{The Angel in the House}. I have noted elsewhere how Patmore’s narrator Felix – writing as a husband and a father – mocks his own youthful courtly pretensions, championing instead a kind of love that others have deemed to be ‘unworthy of a serious song’, \(^{29}\) an everyday, marital love that can incorporate the trivial – paying for a pair of shoes, for example:

\begin{quote}
I, while the shop-girl fitted on \\
The sand-shoes, look’d where, down the bay; \\
The sea glow’d with a shrouded sun. \\
‘I’m ready, Felix; will you pay?’ \(^{30}\)
\end{quote}

Unlike passion, this kind of love can also take interruptions from the kids:

\begin{quote}
‘I did not call you “Dear” or “Love,”’

‘I think, till after Frank was born.’

‘That fault I cannot well remove;’

The rhymes’ – but Frank now blew his horn,
And Walter bark’d, on hands and knees,
At Baby in the mignonette,
And all made, full-cry, for the trees
Where Felix and his Wife were set.
\end{quote}

\textit{(Angel, p. 151)}

But we should look more closely at Patmore before characterising him as that rare exception to the evolutionary rule: the poet of attachment. Felix may be writing from \textit{within} a marriage in \textit{The Angel in the House}, but he is primarily writing \textit{about} a courtship. Shortly before the children make their presence felt, the couple jointly conceive a plan for a true poem of marital love:

\begin{quote}
‘Ah, dearest Wife, a fresh-lit fire \\
Sends forth to heaven great shows of fume,
\end{quote}


And watchers, far away, admire;
But when the flames their power assume,
The more they burn the less they show,
The clouds no longer smirch the sky,
And then the flames intesest glow
When far-off watchers think they die.
The fumes of early love my verse
Has figured — ‘You must paint the flame!’

(Angel, p. 151)

But this is only a projection two pages from the end of the book. Although clearly envisaged to be verse of a superior kind, few readers of the epistolatory second instalment of Patmore’s sequence (The Victories of Love) would argue that the ‘flames’ of poetic inspiration glow more intensely here, and its author abandoned plans for another two-book instalment to conclude the story. Instead, he moved dramatically away from the prosaic mundanities of marriage in his final work, The Unknown Eros, where the poet seems to have been reconverted to the courtly religion of love, offering straight the attitude he had mocked in The Angel in the House:

If she does something but a little sweet,
As gaze towards the glass to set her hair,
See how his soul falls humbled at her feet!
Her gentle step, to go or come,
Gains her more merit than a martyrdom;
And, if she dance, it doth such grace confer
As opes the heaven of heavens to more than her,
And makes a rival of her worshipper.
To die unknown for her were little cost:\n
True, such imagery is no longer deployed in the service of adulterous passion; instead, Patmore’s late odes offer a vision of nuptial bliss:

What is this Maiden fair,
The laughing of whose eye
Is in man’s heart renew’d virginity;
Who yet sick longing breeds

For marriage which exceeds
The inventive guess of Love to satisfy
With hope of utter binding, and of loosing endless dear despair?

(Selected Poems, p. 145)

Yet the aspiration towards ‘utter binding’, and the ‘endless dear despair’ of perceived lack, are both symptoms of passionate desire, not attachment: Patmore’s late poem may be couched in Marian language, but it strongly conveys that pagan sense of existential halfness described by Aristophanes in the Symposium. The poet’s emphasis in this sequence is no longer so much on marital relations (with occasional intrusions from the nursery) as on ‘ardour virginal’, as he calls it in the ninth ode, ‘Delicate Sapientiae de Amore’ (Selected Poems, pp. 76–82: 82). Nothing reflects his retreat from the ins and outs of wedded life more clearly than this; Patmore’s vision of transcendent love appears to be born out of a Platonic distaste for the merely physical, dissipating consummations of earthly existence:

The magnet calls the steel:
Answers the iron to the magnet’s breath;
What do they feel But death!
The clouds of summer kiss in flame and rain,
And are not found again;
But the heavens themselves eternal are with fire
Of unapproach’d desire,
By the aching heart of Love, which cannot rest,
In blissfullest pathos so indeed possess’d.

Love is conceived as making ‘life to be | A fount perpetual of virginity’ and the lover’s heaven ‘the glad Palace of Virginity’, a venue for the eternal foreplay of the soul.

Perhaps the poetry of attachment is more likely to be found in the celebrated records of loss and mourning collected in the first part of The Unknown Eros. In poems such as ‘Departure’, ‘The Azalea’, ‘The Toys’ and ‘Tired Memory’, Patmore records the emotional impact of the loss of his first wife; their poignant tone – testimony to, if not a record of,

long-term attachment – rings particularly true after the metaphysical melodrama of the odes discussed above:

And it was like your great and gracious ways
To turn your talk on daily things, my Dear,
Lifting the luminous, pathetic lash
To let the laughter flash,
Whilst I drew near,
Because you spoke so low that I could scarcely hear.
But all at once to leave me at the last,
More at the wonder than the loss aghast,
With huddled, unintelligible phrase,
And frighten’d eye,
And go your journey of all days
With not one kiss, or a good-bye,
And the only loveless look the look with which you pass’d:
’Twas all unlike your great and gracious ways.

(‘Departure’, Selected Poems, p. 8)

This was the example that Thomas Hardy followed when writing his own widower’s sequence in 1912–13, yet the comparison reminds us that only certain aspects of the marital relationship echo in the poetic imagination. True, several of Hardy’s poems portray Emma in her mature years, but the figure who haunts the poet, as he returns to the places where they courted, is not familiar wife but mysterious ‘ghost-girl-rider’, a source of passion bathed in the transcendent light of erotic potential:

You were she who abode
By those red-veined rocks far West,
You were the swan-necked one who rode
Along the beetling Beeny Crest,
And, reining nigh me,
Would muse and eye me,
While life unrolled us its very best.33

Patmore’s loss does not bring back such intense memories, but the creative flames that it ignites draw less sustenance from recollections of the familiar presence of the loved one than from her tantalising absence; this love

poetry does not mourn the passing of comfortable attachment so much as cry out — somewhat melodramatically in this case — impassioned lack:

At dawn I dream’d, O God, that she was dead,  
And groan’d aloud upon my wretched bed,  
And waked, ah, God, and did not waken her,  
But lay, with eyes still closed,  
Perfectly bless’d in the delicious sphere  
By which I knew so well that she was near,  
My heart to speechless thankfulness composed.  
Till ’gan to stir  
A dizzy somewhat in my troubled head —  
It was the azalea’s breath, and she was dead!  

(‘The Azalea’, Selected Poems, p. 6)

Again, like Hardy, loss has transformed the familiar woman into an absent erotic ideal:

But, kneeling in a Church, one Easter-Day,  
It came to me to say:  
‘Though there is no intelligible rest,  
In Earth or Heaven,  
For me, but on her breast’  

(‘Tired Memory’, Selected Poems, p. 13)

The agonising sensation of existential halfness, and the aspiration towards some kind of spiritual union, appears more intense and poetically stimulating to Patmore than mere conjugal relations could ever be; it is no coincidence that the most authentic experience of physical passion communicated in this sequence occurs within a dream:

And the same night, in slumber lying,  
I, who had dream’d of thee as sad and sick and dying,  
And only so, nightly for all one year,  
Did thee, my own most Dear,  
Possess,  
In gay, celestial beauty nothing coy,  
And felt thy soft caress  
With heretofore unknown reality of joy.
For the passionate lover/poet, such dreams are not deceiving fantasies but potential channels towards transcendence, or ‘heretofore unknown reality’.

Coventry Patmore took not only the adulterous intent out of love poetry, then, he ultimately took the flesh and blood out of it altogether, leaving us with visions of disembodied passion rather than records of attachment. The chief poetic witness to the Christian marriage ceremony turns out to have been a high priest of eros. Victorian society may have placed great value on marriage and on family relations, but in truth love poems by celebrated authors such as Patmore, Matthew Arnold, both of the Rossettis, Browning and Barrett Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne and early Yeats (to name but a few) speak far more frequently of the exquisite afflictions of passion than of the consolations of attachment. Curiously, more convincing evidence for the existence of ‘attachment poetry’ can be found from the period in which marital bonds loosened as never before. When we move into the twentieth century, poems of attachment begin to crop up more frequently, and in the least expected of places: the poetry of Robert Graves, for example.

Looking in his shaving-mirror, Graves perceived an incongruity between his battle-damaged face (‘one brow drooping’, ‘crookedly broken nose’, ‘teeth, few’) and his gallant attitude: he remains the innocent who ‘still stands ready, with a boy’s presumption, | To court the queen in her high silk pavilion’. There is more than a hint of self-mockery in this anachronistic pose, yet at the same time the poet is acknowledging – with a sense of wonder – his own continuing allegiance to the erotic ethos. Graves’s courtly self-image, and his Platonic vision of love ‘as the union of complementary souls, an ecstatic event which sets the world on fire and allows them to transcend the loveless limits of time, space and circumstance’, both looked wilfully eccentric and outdated in the mid-twentieth century, and few critics would now concur with Martin Seymour-Smith’s laudation of this writer as ‘the foremost English-language love poet of this century – and probably of the two preceding ones, too’. Yet if Graves was neither a typical nor a particularly innovative modern love poet, he does have a strong claim to the title of most dedicated practitioner in the field: the fact that he regarded erotic passion not so much as an authentic source of lyric poetry but as the only authentic source for lyric poetry led Graves to the conviction

that dutiful poets must by necessity ‘remain in love’ throughout their lives (Poems About Love, p. 5). He was not, as we know, talking about remaining in love with the same woman. The succession of muses who inspired Graves’s love poetry can, in retrospect, be seen as a logical (if morally questionable) result of his belief that the true poet must endure a constant state of passion, a state that — as we have seen — has evolved a limited shelf-life. Endure is the operative word, here. For Graves, the struggle was not so much in the poetic composition itself, but in the necessary experience that lay behind that composition: creativity was born ‘from crucibles of love’ (Selected Poems, p. 249), love poems should record in plain terms the agonised suffering of the lover, spurned by the necessarily heartless beloved (necessarily, as reciprocation is one of the few guaranteed remedies for passion — see Tennyson, Love and Limerance, p. 255). If we are looking for an artistic precedent, then this emphasis on love as an affliction (a ‘universal migraine’) almost to be relished (‘Could you endure such grief | At any hand but hers?’36 when combined with the hard-nosed wit and epigrammatic directness of Graves’s language, takes us all the way back to Catullus, who would undoubtedly recognise the mixed feelings behind ‘Song: Though Once True Lovers’:

Though once true lovers,  
We are less than friends.  
What woman ever  
So ill-used her man?  
That I played false  
Not even she pretends:  
May God forgive her,  
For, alas, I can.

(Selected Poems, p. 225)

Having said this, the greatest test of endurance was probably undertaken by Graves’s second wife, Beryl. True to his courtly credo, her husband’s attitude towards marital love — at least as a source of poetic inspiration — was dismissive: he states baldly that ‘poets ... refuse to let courtship degenerate into marital routine’ (Poems about Love, p. 5), and his own depictions of such routine can be little short of chilling:

Counting the beats  
Counting the slow heart beats,

36 Both quotes are taken from ‘Symptoms of Love’, in Selected Poems, p. 190.
The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats
Wakeful they lie.

(‘Counting the Beats’, Selected Poems, p. 166)

Call it a good marriage:
They never fought in public,
They acted circumspectly
And faced the world with pride;
Thus the hazards of their love-bed
Were none of our damned business –
Till as jurymen we sat on
Two deaths by suicide.

(‘Call it a Good Marriage’, Penguin Book of Love Poetry, p. 307)

The existence of the muses ensured that Graves’s marriage to Beryl could hardly be described as ‘routine’, yet where his previous partnership with Laura Riding had been characterised by passionate intensity, burning itself out within a relatively short period of time, Graves’s second marriage lasted for over forty years and was only ended by his death. Contrary to his theory that the ‘marital routine’ puts paid to true inspiration, the writing that emerged from this partnership has an authenticity of tone often lacking in Graves’s ‘muse-inspired’ poetry. True, it could be argued that the much-admired poems written early in his relationship with Beryl – for example, ‘Despite and Still’, ‘She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep’ and ‘Through Nightmare’ – communicate the erotic charge of a newly established connection rather than the dailyness of attachment. Yet as Miranda Seymour has argued, the attitude within these poems seems different from the courtly pose that had gone before: ‘Intimacy has replaced reverence. These poems read as if murmured across the pillows; they are full of a spirit of tender protectiveness towards a cherished and vulnerable equal, where the poems to Riding had been written to a superior being’. 37 If, rather than erotically idealising the beloved as a vehicle for the goddess, agape is evidenced by a willingness to concentrate on another’s flawed humanity, if agape recognises the ‘otherness’ of this beloved rather than seeing her as a hitherto lacking ‘other half’ of oneself, then even Graves’s earliest poems about Beryl – such as ‘Despite and Still’ – speak of attachment and marital love:

We have been such as draw
The losing straw –

You of your gentleness,
I of my rashness,
Both of despair –
Yet still might share
This happy will:
To love despite and still.

("Selected Poems, p. 145"

Superficially sentimental (for this poet, at least) and apparently idealistic in its commitment, this is actually clear-eyed: the love exists ‘despite’ already recognised differences and past difficulties, an open-ended commitment that will ‘still’ continue despite the alluring ‘loves in alternative’ (for which we should read passions) that the poet is already anticipating.

Graves’s sometimes vociferously proclaimed fealty to the White Goddess, who was establishing Her presence in his mind at exactly the same time as Beryl was establishing the marital home in Deya, made him uniquely susceptible to the lure of passion, and there is no shortage of poetic residue from this. Much of his later verse, however, seems like mere rehearsal and reiteration; the poet’s own meditation on the latter word can be turned against him:

The death of love comes from reiteration:
A single line sung over and over again –
No prelude and no end.

(‘The Reiteration’, Selected Poems, p. 238)
And at the married fireside, sleep of soul and sleep of fancy,
Joan and Darby.
Silence of the world without a sound;
And beside the winter faggot

Joan and Darby sit and dose and dream and wake –
Dream they hear the flowing, singing river,
See the berries in the island brake;
Dream they hear the weir,
See the gliding shallop mar the stream.
Hark! in your dreams do you hear? 38

Shared dreams mark out as profoundly idealistic Stevenson’s portrayal of identities long fused through love – this is eros in old age, if you like; by contrast, Graves’s portrayal of ‘Joan and Darby in their weather lodge | Who never venture out in the same weather’ reflects his appreciation of the enduring differences between a married couple. Once again, his poetry of attachment is only superficially sentimental:

As for my love, I gifted my heart to her
Twenty years ago, without proviso,
And in return she gifted hers to me;
Yet still they beat as two, unyielding in
Their honest, first reluctance to agree.

‘Love’ is a given in the first line of this stanza, but this is not the ‘yielding’ love that promises metaphysical union: the two hearts continue to beat as two, not as one. Graves’s commemoration of the couple’s ‘honest, first reluctance to agree’ is also a celebration of their persistent individuality, and speaks of a respect for ‘the otherness of the beloved person’ (Ball, Heart’s Events, p. 216). The agonising pagan passions of Catullus are momentarily displaced by a clear-sighted and ultimately consoling Christian vision of marital partnership, what Patmore describes as ‘the embrace of love . . . o’er a gulf of difference’ (Angel in the House, p. 70). As it turns out, then, the most committed and passionate of twentieth-century love poets – or at least the poet most committed to the aesthetics of passion – also writes convincingly and originally about marital

attachment, and this from within marriage, not in anticipation of wedded bliss, or reflecting idealistically on past union.

The ‘Ordinary, Mysterious’ Wife

It would, of course, be somewhat perverse to recast Robert Graves as an artistic role-model in this regard. A more suitable candidate could be the similarly long-married Seamus Heaney, some of whose best poems – I would argue – have been inspired by conjugal love. This might come as a surprise to readers who know Heaney primarily as a poet concerned with matters of regional and political identity: his responses to the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ established his reputation in the early 1970s, and his Nobel Prize was awarded for ‘continual endeavour to find poetic expression for complex ethical issues’. Yet where Graves wrote the occasional poem reflecting on his marriage, and would undoubtedly have regarded these as something of a sideline, Heaney has written a steady stream of poems about his relationship with wife Marie since dedicating his first major volume to her. *Death of a Naturalist* was published during the year following his marriage, and contains (amongst others) ‘Honeymoon Flight’ and ‘Poem’ *For Marie*, in which childhood memories of diligent construction (‘Yearly ... I’d strip a layer of sods to build the wall’) and routine disappointment (‘Yearly ... the sods would fall’) are transcended by an image of procreative union:

Love, you shall perfect for me this child  
Whose small imperfect limits would keep breaking;  
Within new limits now, arrange the world  
Within our walls, within our golden ring.  

From the start, then, Heaney has been concerned not only with conscientiously staking out his own rural territory, or later his territory of the imagination (the ‘realms of whisper’, as he puts it in ‘A Snowshoe’) within his poetry, but also with establishing the marital home and its own concomitant aesthetic values. It is a combination we re-encounter in the 1972 volume *Wintering Out*: on the one hand, there are the much-admired ‘place-name’ poems that seek to phonologically distil the essence of a

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40 *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) p. 48. All Heaney volumes cited were published in London by Faber & Faber.

particular locale (‘Toome’, ‘Broagh’ and ‘Anahorish’); on the other, there is the five-part ‘Summer Home’, which records marital disharmony ‘under the homely sheet’, but nevertheless concludes in the first-person plural: ‘Our love calls tiny as a tuning fork’ (pp. 59–61: 61).

‘Summer Home’, it has to be admitted, is not a convincing poem: Heaney’s own poetic tuning fork appears to have been drowned out by Robert Lowell’s shocking declamations of marital disharmony here (see, for example, ‘Man and Wife’, ‘To Speak of the Woe that is in Marriage’ in Life Studies); but by the time he published Field Work in 1978, the Irish poet had turned decisively against Lowell’s ‘heart-hammering’ approach (as he describes it in ‘Elegy’, p. 31), and found his own poetic frequency in more solicitous, sometimes uxorious, love poems. The celebrated ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ not only record the establishment of a renewed sense of poetic vocation following Heaney’s move south to the Republic in 1972, they also reflect Marie’s increasingly influential presence in his life and his writing:

What is my apology for poetry?
The empty briar is swishing
When I come down, and beyond, your face
Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass.

(Field Work, p. 41)

‘Years later’ Heaney was to record the couple’s return to this ‘locus amoenus’ in ‘Glanmore Revisited’, portraying husband and wife as Odysseus and Penelope and their love as evergreen ivy – both symbols of enduring attachment.42 The distinct air of sentimentality, even nostalgia, in the later sequence develops a note that Al Alvarez had already detected in Field Work: he was certainly not celebrating the love poems in this book when he summed up its tone as, ‘in a word, married’.43 As we have seen, marriage and poetry have rarely made happy bedfellows. Alvarez saw the focus on domestic relations in Field Work as a reprehensible withdrawal from the politically engaged and emotionally exposed position that Heaney had reached at the conclusion of his previous book, wherein the poet pictures himself ‘weighing and weighing’ his socio-political responsibilities and ‘feeling | every wind that blows’.44 In contrast to this, the new marital home at

44 ‘Exposure’, North (1975) p. 73.
Glanmore – as depicted in *Field Work* – seemed to Alvarez like a sheltered retreat, a view encouraged by other uxorious images from the book:

> At the worn mouth of the hole
> flight after flight after flight
> the swoop of his wings
> gloved and kissed home

(‘Homecomings II’, *Field Work*, p. 49)

Not all readers concurred with Alvarez, however. Blake Morrison singled out the poems at the heart of *Field Work* as one of this writer’s most distinctive contributions to the contemporary scene, arguing that they achieved ‘a blend of sexual passion and domestic affection unique in modern British poetry’.\(^{45}\) ‘Domestic affection’ is certainly less often encountered in love poetry than is ‘sexual passion’, but Heaney’s work provides compelling evidence for its presence in late twentieth-century verse. Having said that, what Morrison perceptively identifies as unusual about these poems is their apparent accommodation of *both* kinds of love: a conjunction as rare in practice as it is pervasive as a cultural aspiration. The brain scanner tells a disenchanting story: passion and attachment are two distinct phenomena, the coexistence of which appears to be physiologically unsustainable over the medium to long term. Yet somehow, in poems such as ‘The Skunk’ and ‘The Otter’, Heaney deftly weaves these together without sacrificing emotional authenticity. How does he manage this unlikely trick?

I want to suggest that he achieves it by temporarily superimposing the perspectives of passion and attachment. Hardy does something similar in his ‘Poems of 1912–13’, but where his sequence creates palimpsests of love – the compelling ‘Phantom Horsewoman’ at times overwriting, at times overwritten by, the neglected wife – Heaney’s art more often generates a sort of poetic double exposure whereby one individual is seen in the light of two kinds of love, and is thereby – for the space of the poem at least – transformed into the fusion of *eros* and *agape* that never was. In fact, the method is anticipated in the earlier ‘Night Drive’, which reflects upon a period of separation within marriage, but concludes with an image of reunion:

> I thought of you continuously
> A thousand miles south where Italy

On the one hand, we have clear symptoms of passion here, most obviously the continuous thoughts which speak of the obsession and exclusivity characteristic of *eros*. Passion transforms continental Europe into an anthropomorphised map of sexual desire, its mysterious allure signposted by exotic place names (‘Montreuil, Abbéville, Beauvais’), the language of love facilitating an erotic invocation that can be juxtaposed against the historical incantations found elsewhere in Heaney’s work. In *Symposium*, Diotima informs Socrates that the god of love ‘lives in a state of need’, reflecting how passion thrives not so much on the presence as on the *potential* presence of the loved one; such tantalisation is evidently the main poetic impulse behind ‘Night Drive’, and yet Heaney’s poem concludes – somewhat anticlimactically – with renewed ‘ordinariness’, a deliberately prosaic word reflecting the familiarity bred by marital proximity. Passion appears to have mutated into attachment, although just as ‘the smells of ordinariness’ are freshened and transformed by the ‘warm draughts’ of exotic French air that blow through Heaney’s car as he drives south, so the routines of marital love appear to have been reinvigorated by the erotically charged atmosphere of lack. A breath of the unknown renews the claim of the known.

The ‘ordinary’ is again refreshed by the ‘mysterious’ in ‘The Skunk’ (*Field Work*, p. 48), a distinctly risqué poem that plays erotic separation and expectancy against marital proximity and fulfilment. Nowhere is the potent, anticipatory atmosphere of passion more carefully and intensely realised than here, as the poet awaits an exotically ‘foreign’ animal’s arrival:

Night after night
I expected her like a visitor.

The refrigerator whinnied into silence.
My desk light softened beyond the verandah.
Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.
I began to be tense as a voyeur.

An expectant hush is created as the refrigerator cuts off; the pool of light shed by the desk lamp only draws attention towards a pervasive,

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46 *Door into the Dark* (1969) p. 34.
mysterious darkness outside; ghostly fruit picks up the little light that does penetrate, and remind us once more that we are now looking out on exotic territory. Everything here is sharply defined, but everything gestures a little beyond the usual, an impression reflected by the combination of feminine endings and end stops (held breaths?). The reader can fully appreciate the narrator’s tension when informed of it because a tantalising atmosphere has already been created by the poetry. With its overtones of obsessive and predatory sexuality, of trespassing across restricted and foreign territory, and yet also the sense that the erotic charge has been projected onto this territory by the observer, voyeurism is a classic symptom of eros. The first four stanzas of this poem are, then, driven by passion:

After eleven years I was composing  
Love-letters again, broaching the word ‘wife’  
Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel  
Had mutated into the night earth and air

Of California. The beautiful, useless  
tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.  
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine  
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

As in ‘Night Drive’, separation appears to have intensified desire here, and this desire has (to borrow one of Heaney’s favoured words) ‘quickened’ him into writing: ‘love-letters’ within the poem, but also the love poem itself. The particular letter to which he draws our attention provides a tenuous link between writer and absent wife, complementary souls poetically reunited within the mysterious night ‘air of California’—a delicate metaphysical fusion borne upon a speculative undercurrent of ‘if’.

We must, however, remember that the voyeurism in this poem is first metaphorical, and then — when skunk turns out to be stand-in for wife — ‘licensed’. Given the sort of advanced notices that Heaney bestows on his anthropomorphic skunk, one might expect the poetry to rise to the occasion when the animal finally puts in an appearance; but, after the build up of the first four, the last two stanzas of ‘The Skunk’ are deliberately anticlimactic:

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,  
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,
Mythologized, demythologized,
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.

When it becomes visible, the animal’s mysterious allure is undermined by its ordinary ‘snuffing’; similarly, the actual presence of the woman turns out to be less erotically compelling than the feelings generated by her absence. Close attention to the faint, evocative sounds of undressing may recall the moment when Madeline’s ‘rich attire creeps rustling to her knees’ in Keats’ ‘The Eve of Saint Agnes’, but the potential erotic charge of ‘sootfall’ is immediately dissipated by the cosiness of ‘bedtime’. One does not look upon a ‘head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer’ with the entranced gaze of a Porphyro, one smiles at an almost comic posture. The actual peeping of stanza six is, then, considerably less stimulating than the metaphorical peeping of stanza two, confirming our impression that we have now moved from the realms of eros to those of agape. For, as the final stanza reveals, this is a poem that recalls and relives passion but speaks of, and from, attachment. Heaney’s focus is neither exactly on what he saw at home ‘last night’, nor on his intense experience writing ‘love-letters’ in California, but on the relationship between these two, figuratively realised in the skunk/wife’s tail-up rummaging. The poem is, then, recalling eros in the light of agape and playfully re-envisioning agape in the light of eros, superimposing the tantalising absence and amatory display of the skunk onto the familiar presence and bedtime routine of the wife.

In his own famous poem of skunks and voyeurism, Robert Lowell pictured himself crawling kerbs in his Ford, drawn out of the marital home by the fecund air of Fall in New England. ‘Skunk Hour’ seems to be underwritten by a tension between the ‘careless love’ of passion and the cares and responsibilities of attachment, only implicit here, but explicit in preceding poems such as ‘To Speak of the Woe that is in Marriage’. It is not so much the lack of marital woe, rather the lack of such tension that marks out Heaney’s ‘The Skunk’ (and its equally compelling sister poem, ‘The Otter’) as unusual: one searches for disillusionment with the elusive erotic allure of the skunk, or for disappointment with the familiarity of the wife, but one finds neither. This is no battle between eros and agape; rather,
the combination of the wild and the domesticated allows the poet to, aesthetically speaking at least, both have his cake and eat it. The ‘double-exposure’ trick was one that Heaney clearly thought worth repeating, most recently in his Hardyesque poem ‘The Walk’, wherein he contemplates a photographic negative: a ‘longshot’ of the couple, on the one hand now recognised to be shadows of their former passionate selves (“Two shades who have consumed each other’s fire”), and yet also

apt still to rekindle suddenly
If we find along the way charred grass and sticks
And an old fire-fragrance lingering on,
Erotic woodsmoke, witchery, intrigue
Leaving us none the wiser, just better primed
To speed the plough again and feed the flame.  

49 See also ‘The Underground’ (Station Island, p. 13) and ‘A Royal Prospect’ (Seeing Things, pp. 40–1).