

'No longer afraid': Michael Hartnett's *Poems to Younger Women*

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These poems, written over a period of two years, are not an attempt at a psychology of women. Their subjects range in age from one to forty-five. The metres employed are meant to reflect the attitudes of the subjects as felt by me. Some of the matter of the poems is simply a reflection without taking any attitude into account. I have aimed at simplicity of language. If the poems suffer from being sentimental, romantic or vicious, it is because I am no longer afraid of these emotions. In the main they were written out of love.

Michael Hartnett, 1988.

These words are taken from the back cover of the Gallery Press' beautifully presented edition of *Poems to Younger Women*, Michael Hartnett's troubled and troubling collection of love poems, first published on 7 July 1988. The collection displays all of the emotional contradictions of Hartnett's poetry, visceral images of separation, rejection and isolation juxtaposed with the indescribable delicateness and beauty of the natural world. Written in the aftermath of the collapse of his marriage to Rosemary Grantley, whom he married on 4 April 1966, the book oscillates between gentle lyrics celebrating the wholeness of physical and psychological union to poems of utter despair and loneliness. As a collection, it exemplifies the strengths of Hartnett's work; a tightness of form; a close and precise attention to the metre of the poems; an often lacerating honesty in grappling with the complexities of human emotions; a spare yet complex imagery drawn from personal and universal sources; an unconcluded struggle with concepts of self. These poems are accessible, personal, and often brutally honest accounts of a man prepared to confront a life that he clearly regards as imperfect; and they reflect Hartnett's often angry response to an Ireland that 'could warp the most devoted heart'.¹

Poems to Younger Women would certainly be among the lesser known of Hartnett's work. Most references to his extraordinarily eclectic output will include

¹ Michael Hartnett, *Poems to Younger Women* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1988), p. 33.

an analysis of his 1971 version of the Chinese *Tao*, 1975's *A Farewell to English* which contains Hartnett's most anthologized eponymous poem, 1978's *A Necklace of Wrens* or 1985's *Inchicore Haiku*. These collections are a testament to Hartnett's long-held fascination with a variety of forms, ranging from Haiku to sonnets, and the overt attention he paid to metre and rhythm imbues his poetry with a structural tautness and focus that complements the often stark and uncompromising imagery. Indeed, this interest in, and experimentation with, form is indicative of the exploratory work of a good many of his contemporaries, such as Brendan Kennelly and Thomas Kinsella, who appeared eager to embrace non-Irish traditional poetic forms in a somewhat sporadic attempt to embrace outside influences. The discipline required in a collection such as *Inchicore Haiku*, for example, allows Hartnett to explore, with a considerable degree of insight and empathy, the grimmer aspects of life in Dublin in the mid-1980s. This unusual marriage of the brief, momentarily insightful Haiku with a harsh and declining urban setting works surprisingly well. Hartnett adopts the traditional three line syllabic count of 5-7-5 and the Dublin that emerges, or rather the specific enclave of Inchicore, is a place of exile and loneliness. The spartan Haiku form allows Hartnett to weave minute images of isolation, his somewhat tortured self gradually emerging like a slim funnel of cigarette smoke:

Now in Inchicore
My cigarette smoke rises
Like lonesome pub talk.²

The Haikus emerge from Hartnett's often difficult personal experiences, brief often instantaneous moments of personal illumination or sensual overload. The poems confirm his ability to write tight, sharp verses that are both delicately constructed and emotionally expressive. Indeed, Hartnett's liking for the strictness of the Haiku form is indicative of a poet to whom adherence to rhythm, metre and other elements of poetic construction was vitally important. Equally, however, the liking for the Haiku form imposes a discipline from without, and there can be little doubt that the stringent construction of the poems stands in stark contrast to the personal crises that had overtaken Hartnett at that time. The poems speak of a lonely, isolated existence, reminiscent of the sense of exile felt by the poets whose work Hartnett was to translate so effectively, namely Dáibhí Ó Bruadair and Aogán Ó Rathaille:

² Michael Hartnett, *Inchicore Haiku* (Dublin, 1985), Dublin, p. 7.

Banished for treason,
 For betraying my country.
 I live in myself.³

Indeed, in the note printed on the back cover of *Poems to Younger Women*, he makes an overt comment on the function of rhythm in the poems when he remarks that 'the metres employed are meant to reflect the attitudes of the subjects as felt by me'. This is a strong pointer given by Hartnett to encourage the reader to pay close attention to the metres of the poems and to note how differing metres are used to explore often radically different emotional responses to the torturous process of love. For example, the gentler, more reflective tone of a poem such as 'Somewhere in France' lends itself to the iambic pentameter employed, each line developing the poet's intriguing tone of regret for past wrongs. The meter perfectly complements the tone, each line equally weighted as Hartnett gradually recounts how his 'small, shabby façade falls', the delicately constructed alliteration perfectly complementing the unfolding tragedy of his personal implosion. 'Somewhere in France' is a brutally honest poem, assuming of course that the voice is that of Hartnett's. Brendan Kennelly has noted that the use of the first person narrative voice 'is a great distancer',⁴ but the accompanying note to the collection would strongly suggest that Hartnett is indeed writing out of his direct personal experience. This is an important distinction because the clear association of the first person narrative voice with Hartnett certainly gives the poems an emotional edge, laced as they are with the direct, un-channelled voice of the poet. This honesty is somewhat rare in poetry, but Hartnett notes that he is 'no longer afraid of these emotions', and the cathartic effect of the poems is balanced with the open admission of the mess he has made of the important things in his life. The poem is a typical example of Hartnett's work in that the more often it is read the more multi-layered it appears to be. While this could be said of most poems, Hartnett's work particularly lends itself to close reading, inter-connected ideas and images often emerge and retreat through the lines, juxtaposing complicated emotional expression with exquisitely delicate imagery. Hartnett acknowledges that he 'must resign and abdicate and lose the loves my life revolved about', a frank admission of the disintegration of his closest personal relationships. However, this is not a poem of wallowing self-pity, and despite the fact that many of the poems in the collection are about a love lost, Hartnett does not allow his own role in this malaise to escape scrutiny. Indeed, his admission to being 'a sad, pathetic man' is a typical acknowledgment of 'the

3 Ibid., p. 24. 4 Brendan Kennelly, *A Time for Voices* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1999), p. 12.

wrong done' to those around him. Absent from this poem are the more wistful and translucent images of the Haikus, to be replaced by an often blunt admission of his own failings. In a typical moment of emotional self-flagellation, Hartnett refers to himself as a 'sad, pathetic man' who has 'killed the trust' in his unnamed intended. Indeed, the poem contains a reference to 'my futile English', a further acknowledgment of the poet's contradictory liaison with the very words he chooses to use, a linguistic liaison that famously ruptured in 1975. The poem is a wonderful blend of a regular iambic pentameter with an ABAB rhyming scheme that very subtly underscores what might appear on first reading to be a poem that eschews a formal structure. This illusion again is a regular feature of Hartnett's work. He utilizes the regularity of the iambic pentameter to control the clear anger, disappointment and regret that permeate the poem. If, as he claims in the note, that 'meters employed are meant to reflect the attitudes of the subjects as felt by me', then the choice of a traditional Elizabethan meter for a poem of excoriating honesty provides a poignant contrast for the overall effectiveness of the poem. As with many of his poems, form is a crucial if understated element of the final product.

The clear personal recriminations that characterize 'Somewhere in France' are present, albeit in a very different form and mood, in 'Vengeance is mine', the opening poem of the collection. The theatrical title conjures up images of a moustache-twirling vaudeville baddy, whereas the quote actually makes an appearance in the New Testament, Romans 12:19, where Paul writes, "Vengeance is mine, I will pay them back", the Lord promises'.⁵ The poem is certainly angry, juxtaposed with the regular metric rhythm which again provides it with an interesting and challenging contrast. It mixes generic and highly personal images of revenge that require a good deal of contextualizing. Hartnett regularly employs this style in *Poems to Younger Women*. Perhaps mindful of alienating readers with a concentration of somewhat impenetrable imagery, he gradually lures the reader with images that are immediately identifiable. The poem contains an image in the first verse of the inappropriately strong response of an individual to an ant bite, namely the scalding of the entire nest with a kettle of boiling water. This sets the tone for the rest of the poem as Hartnett laments the tough treatment meted out to, presumably, him by an unnamed woman. The poem builds, with a regular rhythm and metre, images of looting, stinging and burning, and an initial sympathy is engendered for the poet, who appears to be crushed by a wanton anger for some as yet unspoken act. However, Hartnett notes that 'I came with olive branches', suggestive of an attempt to seek forgiveness that is clearly unforthcoming. In the penultimate verse, he writes

⁵ *The Jerusalem Bible* (London, 1968), p. 213.

that 'you know the criminal', namely a man 'with the magic fist', a fist that mangles cartilage, an image clearly suggestive of a punch to the face. Is this the poet? While not explicit, the clear inference is that it is, and that the ultimate vengeance appears to lie, not in the woman's inability or unwillingness to forgive her aggressor, but rather in the aggressor's visage being permanently inscribed on the psyche of the victim. Like all effective poems, it makes for uncomfortable reading. The clear inference is that violence has its own in-built parasitical survival mechanism, namely the inability of the victim to forget, let alone forgive. Hartnett notes casually that while 'bruises are undone', the victim will 'see his face in every face' while 'all men merge in one'. However, the voice of the poem is inconsistent, as the narrator recounts that while 'I came with olive branches', the victim, if that is what she is, will see 'his' face in every male face that she sees. Is there a distinction to be made between the 'I' who seeks forgiveness and the somewhat distancing effective of the third person? Given Hartnett's attention to detail throughout his work, clearly there is, the narrative voice oscillating from a personal admission of guilt to the defence of a somewhat vague reference to everyman. Perhaps Hartnett is retreating somewhat, aware that the violence is something that distances himself from his own psyche, and perhaps he does not recognize himself in the act. This complexity typifies the poems in this collection. There is precious little cosying up between reader and poet; and the juxtaposition of binary oppositions, not only within individual poems but between groups of poems across the collection, destabilizes any emerging complacency over what the reader might perceive as authorial intent. Hartnett certainly has this edge in his work, an ability to unsettle the reader through the often elusive nature of the narrative voice.

Although the object of many of the poems remains elusive, there are some that are more explicit, and because of this are consequently tender. The second poem in the collection is 'Poem for Lara, 10', dedicated to his daughter who was born in 1968. This simple poem stands in stark contrast to the first poem in the collection, the form and the rhythm reminiscent of early Celtic poetry and replete with blackbirds, bees and finches. Hartnett presents an uncomplicated pastoral vision with his daughter at the epicentre, the child surrounded by an abundant nature and clearly innocent to the travails that necessarily accompany life. The poem is tinged, however, with an almost inevitable caveat, in which Hartnett almost fatalistically hopes that his daughter may indefinitely remain in the idyll, free from 'sorrow-chains' that might impede her progress. The poem echoes W.B. Yeats' 'A Prayer for My Daughter' in which he hopes that she 'may be granted beauty'⁶ but not a beauty 'to make a stranger's eye distraught'. Both poets present

6 A. Norman Jeffares (ed.), *Yeats's Poems* (Dublin, 1989), p. 295.

concrete images of the innocence of childhood but these images are predicated on a transient temporality that can only be felt by the observing parent. The poem ends with a gentle evocation of the paternal emotions that are so patently lost in many of the other poems in the collection –

Here's my blessing for you, girl,
It is no petty grace –
May you have your mother's soul
and the beauty of her face.

What is particularly noteworthy of these last four lines is Hartnett's elision of self. His blessing for his daughter contains no reference to any genetic inheritance she has from him, again indicative of a recurring sense of self-loathing that permeates this collection. Here Hartnett is an absent, observational figure, regarding his beautiful child as a 'little queen', his strongest desire being that she inherits all she can from her mother. This is not an abdication of responsibility but rather a somewhat covert admission of a chronic inability to cope with pressures and duties of parenthood. To some extent, this discomfort with his role as a father points to the largely ambivalent portrayal of children in general in the collection. While the poem devoted directly to his daughter is emotional and affirming, there are other poems in the collection where children are portrayed almost as emotional parasites, feeding off the love that originally created them and unwittingly contributing to the gradual destruction of that love by their very presence. The poem 'Unfinished Novel' opens with the unambiguous reference to children as 'the brats', and the poem is written in a curious tone, the poet referring to 'the milk they drink is yours', thereby making the reader somehow complicit in this dialogue and drawing a rather conspiratorial air around the poem. The parasitical reference revolves around the confluence of 'each drop' of breast milk being compared to 'another line unwritten' while each unwritten page lies 'crumpled like a puffball on the floor'. The presence of children is clearly upsetting the muse, and even the work ethic of the writer is flaccid when confronted by the 'quick infant mind' that reduces the typewriter to 'a battered toy'. In many senses this is a very refreshing poem, reversing the tried and tested sentimentality usually associated with poetry about children to a frank and honest, and indeed realistic, portrayal of the practical chaos associated with young children. What is equally important is the degree and nature of the personal sacrifice involved in the rearing of children. Existence becomes somewhat vicarious, the children portrayed as 'gorged' and 'assailing',

and the adult reduced to 'the basic syllables of the cave'. Hartnett portrays the mother, or 'you', as capable of isolating any feeling of sadness over this personal intrusion into her existence and negation of her needs, being able to 'polarise regret' during the chaos. The poem eschews any form of sentimentality that contrasts sharply with the clear emotion of 'Poem to Lara, 10', and the final image of the 'cunning offspring' being compared to pigs as they 'root up the truffles of your mind' is at once comic and tragic. 'Unfinished Novel' again highlights the unpredictability of Hartnett's poetry while concurrently indicating his continued willingness to confront uncomfortable emotions that lurk beneath the often safe platitudes of poetry dedicated to children. It is clear from this poem that he is, as he states in the note, clearly 'no longer afraid of these emotions'.

It is in a poem entitled 'For My God-daughter, B.A.H.', the final poem in the collection, that Hartnett comes closest to Yeats' somewhat pessimistic vision of the future as outlined in 'A Prayer for My Daughter'. Again, this is a personalized poem, dedicated to a family member and consequently somewhat lighter in tone than other poems in the collection. It is noticeable that when Hartnett is writing about a recognizable, named individual, he is clearly cognizant of their sensibilities and tends to temper whatever misgivings he might be feeling. It is only in the more generic poems where the subject is somewhat questionable that Hartnett can let his anger have free rein. This commendable sensitivity clearly indicates that even though the period in which the poems in this collection were written was particularly fraught for Hartnett, he retains an ability to remove himself somewhat from his obvious despair and anger. The poem presents an image of a poisonous Dublin, choking from 'chemical air' and hosting a river in which the fish 'turn their poisoned silver to the sky'. This unhealthy physical atmosphere is the backdrop to the emotionally stunted and creatively stultifying image of 'our city'. For Hartnett, the city 'has an ugliness that could warp the most devoted heart', and he warns 'my lovely girl' that she has to constantly look for 'those people in whom joy survives'. This joy is to be found in the detail of life, where 'one cobweb threading rain can civilise a race', a sentiment that echoes Patrick Kavanagh's often-quoted assertion in *The Great Hunger* that 'God is in the bits and pieces of everyday'.⁷ He twice refers to the 'warping' of the heart as an almost inevitable consequence of city living and something that can only be consciously resisted by surrounding the self with 'people in whom joy survives', a glimpse in to the depressed state that Hartnett found himself in at the time of these poems. The poem is equally intriguing in

⁷ Peter Kavanagh (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York, 1996), p. 93.

that, although Hartnett is referring specifically to Dublin when he notes that 'this place' could warp the heart, he immediately follows this with the phrase 'this land', thereby broadening his bleak vision to the country as a whole. What is interesting here is that as a result his critique cannot be merely seen as a clichéd rural exile lamenting the coldness of the city, but rather a comment on Ireland as a whole. The poem ends on a wonderfully inverted image in which a playful Hartnett emerges and hints at an Ireland that can continue to surprise as well as warp:

For there is an Ireland, where
Trees suddenly fly away
And leave their pigeons, baffled,
Standing in the air.

Although *Poems to Younger Women* is dedicated to Hartnett's mother, Brigid, most of the poems are either about children or the painful disintegration of a close relationship and there are strong elements of an emerging counter-culture that characterises so much of Hartnett's work. His complex and often difficult relationships with those immediately close to him is a recurring theme in much of his work and in the beautifully sad poem 'That Actor Kiss' he recalls kissing his father, Denis, as he lay dying in hospital in 1984. Again this is a double-edged poem, laced with sentiment but, as is often the case with Hartnett, tinged with the regret of yet another significant unfulfilled relationship. He mentions '41', the year of his birth, but by this stage his father's memories had 'congealed into a timeless leaking heap'⁸ and any 'echoes that I might have prized' have long since faded. Before the poem becomes a lament for opportunities that have passed, however, Hartnett recalls his father's lasting legacy:

he willed me his bitterness and thirst,
his cold ability to close a door.

In 'That Actor Kiss', Hartnett's ability to once again pull the rug from under his reader's feet is exemplified as he constantly reveals a past that somehow he has survived, albeit scarred and wounded. Although he is partially redeemed by his conscious awareness of the contemporary consequences of his past, too often he appears unable to re-learn patterns of behaviour and appears destined to repeat the very things he loathes. The most touching moment occurs at the end of the poem when he realizes that this kiss he has given his father will not only be the last, but was also the

⁸ Michael Hartnett, *Selected and New Poems* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1994), p. 48.

first. Typically, he notes this 'over a drink', his sole comfort in a world that appears to have turned its back on him. However, rarely will a poem be found in which Hartnett appears to wallow in any form of self-pity, and the predominant emotional response to his difficulties seems to be a characteristic stoicism and an honest recollection of his own culpability. Indeed, this often disconcerting honesty is apparent from some of his earliest works and is certainly a key attribute of his work.

In the poem 'I Have Managed ...', written during his stay in West Kensington, London, in 1967 and published in *Selected Poems* in 1970, the 26-year-old Hartnett acknowledges his struggles with 'hysteria'⁹ whilst learning to 'suppress a scream' with his 'second-rate heart'. He openly admits to 'knowing what it is to be loved / and not love back with equal strength', a clear recognition in an early poem of the emotional problems that were to cause such personal difficulties for him in later life. However, it is the regular dealing with and confronting of his somewhat dystopian view of himself that gives Hartnett's poetry its undoubted power.

The uneasy relationships with those around him permeate *Poems to Younger Women*. There are few, if any, interactions described in the poems that bring Hartnett any lasting happiness, despite their initial intensity and undoubted passion. While he is often very honest and direct in the collection, addressing poems to identifiable people, other poems are more elusive in terms of their biographical significance. 'One Word', for example, is an intriguing poem in which Hartnett describes how 'the most delicate relationship' can be destroyed by what he twice refers to as 'one schoolboy word', a word that is not clearly enunciated. The object of the poem is a familiar Hartnett target, a long-term liaison with another human being that 'could have blossomed / to a kind of flower / that may have had the stuff / of legend in its sleeping start'. The virtual impossibility of maintaining the initial passionate impetus is noted when Hartnett wonders about the ease with which human interaction becomes a 'labyrinth of hint and code', a maze from which he finds it impossible to escape. Again, however, he does not shy away from his personal culpability in the disintegration of this relationship by detailing 'bespoke quarrels' and 'rendezvous not kept' and the intriguing 'schoolboy' word that is spoken is recognized as the final shattering blow that brought down this most fragile of edifices. Indeed, vulnerability is a characteristic that emerges from many of the poems in the collection, a fragility of self that continually brings the poet to a painful self-recognition similar to Oscar Wilde's assertion in the last stanza of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that 'all men kill the thing they love'.¹⁰ Hartnett refers to 'the brittle walls' of the 'crystal shell' that can so eas-

⁹ Michael Hartnett, *Selected Poems* (Dublin, 1970), p. 29. ¹⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1948), p. 860.

ily be shattered by simple human communication. In 'Retro Me' he laments the fact that he is continually haunted by 'demons' that he appears 'incapable of driving out', real or imagined phantasms that lead him to perhaps the most melancholy and down-beat assertion in the entire collection contained in the poem 'Small Hope'. Describing himself as 'all scars', Hartnett wonders if it is possible that after 'all the wars' he could meet someone to whom he could 'mumble' the word 'love'. This possibility is categorically rejected as he unequivocally states that 'there is no such thing' while his life is filled with 'lost kisses and broken delf', a simple yet tragic image of the reality of his situation. His existence is portrayed as a series of regrets, profound opportunities lost that found no solace in 'the bars / my elbows love to rub and the jars / my liver has absorbed'. The small hope wished for is a casual acquaintance that can bring momentary relief, a person with whom he can 'forget all vows' and 'annex myself', the ultimate giving up of a fractured self to another.

'Small Hope' is unquestionably the most painful poem in a collection in which all of Hartnett's poetic skills and emotional intensity are to the fore. He eschews the traditional escape route of the poet, namely an implied salvation achieved through his art when he states that 'I am no thrush that wakes in storms to sing'. His own poetic contribution is self-mockingly described as being 'enmeshed in the absurd', and there are constant references in the collection to the futility of poetic endeavour or at least of poetry's inadequacies in gauging and recording the vicissitudes of human interaction. One wonders exactly what the small hope referred to in title of the poem actually is, given the almost complete lack of recovery or deliverance that is proffered.

Poems to Younger Women is a powerful, shocking and intense collection, exemplifying all of the intensity that Hartnett brought to every aspect of his life, as well as showcasing the firm control he exhibited over the technical aspects of his work. It certainly stands as one of the most over-looked of his collections but it equally holds its own in any interpretation of his life's work, a testament to the honesty of his difficult and troubling emotional responses to life as well as a fearless determination to face down the innumerable demons that haunted him throughout that life. Ultimately, Hartnett himself points to the cathartic nature of the collection, writing that 'in the main, they (the poems) were written out of love' and in such a context the collection becomes an important book in the attempted understanding of a brilliant poet and complicated man.