

After a Journey

Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost;
Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me. the sound of the sea
Where you will next be there's no knowing,
Facing round about me everywhere,
With your nut-coloured hair,
And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going. Emma's rose pink cheeks

Yes: I have re-entered your olden haunts at last; the places where you often used to go
Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you;
What have you now found to say of our past -
Viewed across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?
Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?
Things were not lastly as firstly well
With us twain, you tell? twain - two
But all's closed now, despite Time's derision. derision - mocking

I see what you are doing: you are leading me on
To the spots we knew when we haunted here together, often used to go
The waterfall, above which the mist-bow shone
At the then fair hour in the then fair weather,
And the cave just under, with a voice still so hollow
That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
When you were all aglow,
And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow!

Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see, flitting – moving quickly from place to place
The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily, preen – clean themselves, arrange their feathers
Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me, ghosts are said to vanish at daybreak
For the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily.
Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours, lours – looks gloomy
The bringing me here; nay, bring me here again!
I am just the same as when
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.

PENTARGAN BAY.

This is the poem in the elegies of 1912/3 which moves the scene from Dorset, where Emma died, to Cornwall, where Hardy had first met Emma Gifford in March 1870. In early March 1913 he revisited the places they had been together 43 years earlier. In this poem he describes his attempts to follow her ghost along the Cornish cliffs where they used to wander.

Hardy announces his intentions in the opening line. He has made the journey from Dorset to Cornwall, 'Hereto I come to...' (I come here to ...), 'to view a voiceless ghost'. Earlier, in the month after she died, he had written 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me.' Now she is 'voiceless', silent, and he has come to see her. In 'The Voice' he had written

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then ...'

Although he no longer hears her, he still wishes to see her, and he repeats 'view' in this poem, the word he used in 'The Voice'. The ghostliness of the phantom he has come to see is emphasised through the repeated s's in 'a voiceless ghost'.

But after the matter-of-fact opening line with its regular iambic pentameter rhythm, the pace is slow, hesitant, with many commas. Hardy is lost:

Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
.. Where you will next be there's no knowing
Facing round about me everywhere ...

He repeats 'Whither, O whither' (where, O where) will he now be drawn. 'Up', 'down', 'lost', 'there's no knowing', 'round about me everywhere.' He is literally lost because he is aware of her presence everywhere and feels her drawing him after her, but he can't definitely find her; she remains elusive. There is a sense in which he is also emotionally lost: 'I'm lonely, lost'. The regular iambic rhythm of the opening line disintegrates immediately, conveying his bewilderment as he is drawn this way and that. The insistent tug of the ghost is indicated through the repeated 'i' sound in 'its whim'

Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost ...

Sometimes the rhythm hurries: 'up the cliff', sometimes Hardy seems to be at a standstill, with the heavily stressed 'lonely, lost' (and 'lost' rhymes with the 'ghost' that is drawing him after itself). It seems that he senses her everywhere, as the meaning and the repeated 'ou' sound suggest: Facing round about me everywhere ...

Hardy also feels overawed by the majesty of Emma's 'olden haunts', her native Cornish landscape and seascape; 'the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me'. He is evidently on the cliffs near the sea, so the waters are the sea waters, and their 'ejaculations' are probably 'the eternal soliloquy of the waters' as he wrote in an early novel. In his next poem, 'Beeny Cliff' he writes of 'the waves ... saying their ceaseless babbling say.'

Whereas in the second line Hardy writes of Emma's ghost as 'it', in the last two lines of the opening verse, he describes a vivid, beautiful woman:

... your nut-coloured hair,
And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.'

(He wrote to the rector of St Juniot (where he had met Emma) in August of 1913, saying that some parishioners there 'may perhaps recall her golden curls and rosy colour ... for she was very attractive.')

The 'it' of the opening is followed by 'you' and 'your', a direct address to the woman he seeks.

In the first verse Hardy writes in the present tense and in the future, 'where you will next be there's no knowing'. In the second verse, starting in the present, he looks back to their unhappy past: 'Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division.' ('Wrought' means literally worked, or here, brought about.) The second verse recognises that all was not well in the 43 years of their marriage. '... through the dead scenes I have tracked you', 'scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you', 'summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division', and 'things were not lastly as firstly well / With us twain'. Hardy imagines Emma telling him what was unhappy about 'our past'. Although he is facing their lack of closeness in marriage, there is a sense of closeness in this verse, with much 'I' and 'you' and 'us twain'. I take 'Time's derision' (scorn) to mean that during the 43 years, Time scorned their initial happiness by turning it into misery.

As so often, the poem is built on contrasts. In the first verse there is the – as it were – contrast of the lonely living man and the elusive ghost. In the second, the contrast is between past and present. He is looking for her not only in a physical place 'up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost'. He is also looking for her through time: 'through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you ... Viewed across the dark space wherein I have lacked you.' And within the past, there is the earlier past when they were happy, and the more recent past when they were not – another set of contrasts:

Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division.

Things were not lastly as firstly well ...

Hardy stresses the contrasts between their early happiness and later unhappiness: 'summer' gives way to 'autumn'; 'sweets' become 'division'; 'firstly' becomes 'lastly'.

In the third verse Hardy sustains the direct address to the ghost:

I see what you are doing: you are leading me on

To the spots we knew when we haunted here together.

The line stops and restarts again, mimicking his hesitant movement as he pursues the ghost. She leads him on in an enjambement across the end of the line 'you are leading me on / To the spots we knew.' And Hardy employs the word 'haunted' in this verse as he did in verse two when he referred to 'your olden haunts'. He means to go to a place often, or a place where someone often goes. But given that he describes Emma as a 'ghost' the word haunt must indicate his attempts to join her now, now that she is a ghost who haunts (in a different sense).

The spot that Hardy chooses to describe, of the many 'we knew when we haunted here together' is the waterfall with its rainbow-in-the-mist shining above it. His awareness of how their relationship subsequently deteriorated is made clear by his describing that happy time as 'the then fair hour in the then fair weather.' Is there an implicit reproach from Emma, that she is leading him on to the places where they were once happy? The cave under the waterfall seems to call out to Hardy with a hollow sound, and it reminds him of the time forty years earlier when Emma was 'all aglow'. Now she is 'the thin ghost' – the repeated gs and 'o' sound link the words that describe what she was and what she now is. The feminine rhymes, 'hollow' and 'follow' sound the like the echo from the cave. Hardy is vividly conscious of the past, acutely aware of the so-different present. The tenses in this verse move from present 'you are doing: you are leading' and past 'we knew when we haunted here'. Linking the awareness of past and present are the 'o' sounds in 'hollow', 'ago', 'aglow', 'ghost' and 'follow' in their conspicuous rhyming positions at the end of the lines.

The birds and seals preen and flop, unaware of the flitting ghost. Hardy knows that at dawn, ghosts must vanish. He tells Emma that he doesn't mind being brought to this place, even though 'Life lours' (looks gloomy). He asks her to bring him there again, claiming that he is the same man she knew when they first met, 'Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.' The rhyme of lours and flowers underlines the contrast of happy life then and gloom now. But can he continue to recapture past happiness, to ask her to 'bring me here again' (is here a physical or an emotional place?). She 'will have ... to vanish' (future tense). Time does not keep still: 'the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily'. He has now regained his former love for her, but she is irrevocably dead.

Tim Armstrong calls Cornwall 'the landscape of memory and romance.' M Sexton comments that the opening line shifts the stress of the sequence of poems from voice (think of 'The Voice') to vision. Alan Pound writes in *York Notes Advanced*: 'this is a stunning poem ... The poem wishes to assert that the human mind, which understands loss, lack is capable of reclaiming the past and imposing human value on the landscape.' Donald Davie, in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, says that the poem ends with 'unprecedented serenity.' Alan Pound, however, feels that the poem ends 'on a note of despair.'

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines