A Quiet Contending

Poetic Restraint and Emotional Release
Thomas Hardy's, "The Voice"

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The Voice

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

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,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

    Thus I; faltering forward,
    Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
    And the woman calling.

December 1912

If, as he says in his notebooks, "the ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own,"[1] Thomas Hardy reveals the orchestration of emotion as a complex balance of the will: a restraint against outpouring and the always-paired if delayed point of release. In this "The Voice" is a haunting cast as a love poem, an address to a ghost—or the ghost of a voice—, a call to a woman who holds the poet in her grip; but against this, huge restraint, as if the poet distills for her a richness of each carefully spoken word, and the poem, then, is his struggling toward this expression. It is the language of strangled reminiscence.[2]

If Hardy is as Larkin refers to him "*the* most reticent of men,"[3] then he has a companion in Osip Mandelstam, the poet of great obliqueness. In his "Poem 24," for instance, Mandelstam creates distance and restraint by first directing his attention outward.[4]

> With a vague soughing of leaves
> A black wind rustles by
> And a flickering swallow draws
> A circle against dark sky.
>
> In my gently dying heart
> There is a quiet contending
> Between twilight drawing on
> And daylight ending.
>
> A copper moon stood above
> Woods that night filled with darkness.
> Why is there so little music
> And why such stillness?

Then what was external collapses into the near of the poet's "gently dying heart," but just as quickly, the turn again away. Always this contending between the landscape and the poet's emotional condition within.

Within a tight frame, Hardy's syntax is always limber: sharp returns of pronoun to antecedent and layers of conditionals make us think, then rethink each line as the woman, at each reading, sinks deeper into mystery, as her voice into the poet seeps deeper. Our entry into the poem is slow, distant, the subject only loosely, flatly defined—a "woman much missed"— however, we have little time to dwell on this

before Hardy further complicates with a quick switch of the address to a softer "you" and then, as if this voice had induced him to chorus, the poet reaching out toward her in the haunting, tender echo of "call to me, call to me."

In Coleridge's analysis of the ballads he speaks of repetition as the singer's attempt to "discharge emotion that could not be exhausted in one [single] saying."[5] Here it betrays the emotion of the speaker from that expressed by his stalwart voice at the beginning of the line, just as the use of the second person pronoun betrays the stand-offishness of the initial third person. Repetition is not ordinary speech; it is evidence of direct contact with emotion, and to this the speaker is just waking up, just coming to an awareness of the voice behind him.

In the first lines we also witness Hardy's strange take on ballad meter. Where the ballad is traditionally in iambic quatrains, within these lines are a collection of trochees, dactyls, anapests, and only the occasional iamb that when combined give the poem its mysterious, staggering meter. In alternating between the trailing rhythm of dactylic final foot and the more emphatic end-of-line truncation of this foot, Hardy creates both a charged and surprising meter that mirrors the emotional charge. Any poem aches towards true utterance—Hardy is insistent.

After his initial, repeated longing, the poet seems determined to derail this emotion with a complex weaving of referent and antecedent indicative of the intellect. Carefully and exactly placing her in the days of fairness, he deflects (or attempts to deflect) not only the direction of the poem but himself from the charged moment. But in his avoidance he circumscribes it, and so what is inside, emptiness, builds.

At odds to all this complication are monosyllables, each easy-in-the-mouth, as if each one must be carefully spoken to find its place. This act of deliberate speaking creates a dignity for the speaker—as one sounding out his life syllable by syllable, trying to make it make sense.

The second stanza takes a step nearer the voice.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,

The address to "you" (brought to our attention with a stress on the word) brings her closer to the poet than the previous use of the pronoun, itself qualified by the impersonal "woman." Moreover, the address here is *direct*, a question to the voice herself, where above she was set off in indirect statement, speaking into the air in "how you call to me." That this is a question suggests not only a nearness to the woman (the use of the interrogative being an assumption of some audience to answer), but it also reveals a continuing uncertainty, even disbelief, one which continues into the rest of the line. "Let me view you, then," may be heard as a continuation of the address, a command to the voice that she show herself; or it might be the poet commanding his own imagination to conjure a figure to go with this (imagined) voice.

What is this voice? The easy placement is as figurative embodiment of memory and the poem then is a remembrance. But there is too much immediacy here for the voice to lie wholly in the mind of the speaker. There is physicality to the voice, a sense of the poet, unexpecting, being snuck up upon by its repeated calling. And then his disbelief at the voice and his own longing, the poet Poe-like trying to both grapple with this intrusion into the chamber of his present life and also trying (unsuccessfully) to explain it away. What is beautiful in Hardy is that we need not settle on one reading. In the field of this poem—in the mind of the poet—she is *very much here*, and if we hesitate a bit between dreamworld and actual then we experience the poet's exact sensation of nearness, then loss, the whole poem a consequence of that-which-cannot-be-fully-had. That is, changes from second to third person, of nearness to distance in point of view are physical evidence of the dynamic that exists between the poet and this woman, this voice. The drive, then, is toward a simultaneous identifying of the emotional charge and a suppression of it, a guessing and a second guessing in which the trials of the poem mirror the complex, unsingular emotional state of the poet and this difficulty is itself a subject of the poem.

With the question that opens this stanza and the mode of address throughout, the poem is a conversation. It is, however, a conversation without dialog, the woman addressed, questioned, but never—not even in the mind of the poet—does she provide direct response. Yet she is far from mute. At times in the background, but never far off is the *voice*. It begins in the title, then her calling, calling, both dramatically to the speaker and immediately to the reader in the rich language of every spoken word.

The center of the second stanza is more of that mixture of distances.

> Standing as when I drew near to the town
> Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,

We find proximity as the poet and voice-image draw together, one arriving in and one waiting in the town. But the town itself is oddly ordinary and indistinct despite its definite article ("the town" could be anywhere) and indeterminate in time (the unspecified, conditional action of "would wait"). Once more, both lines are couched in the remove of simile with the poem's nearly ubiquitous "as," the images of the lines not "actual" but *as if*, and the whole poem becoming more an apparition of multiplying distances.

Again, the linguistic betrayal: a pause at a colon and then "yes, as I knew you then." The build up over seven lines of nearness, then distance, of trying to grasp her elusive voice, here resides in an almost painfully long mid-line caesura and the single word "yes," its utterance without direct purpose. It is affirmation with no specific question to answer. It is affirmation as intensifier; but it also echoes back (as our minds, hard-wired for completion of the logical figures in language, trace back to the antecedent query) to the question that was posed at the beginning of this stanza and the poet and the woman are syntactically joined. The "yes" is almost guttural, coming from below the consciousness of the poet, more like the gully of a sigh than the projection of speech. It is perhaps the closest he gets to her, and yet he cannot remain. Nowhere else in the poem is the diction so like face-to-face speech, but it is the final adverb "then" that turns the line downward and makes brief any possibility of contact. The end-of-line

emphasis is on the past, *then*, rather than the present, an emphasis made stronger by the exact rhyme with a previous line. Making the return to the top of the stanza we recall more clearly the mode of address in the echoed command "Let me view you, then." Only through address can the poet hope to reach her, only through address can he transcend the supernatural, the metaphorical, the actual.

The final line of this stanza, though saved from cliché only by a slight twist on "sky blue," is now distinct in its image (the "original air-blue gown") and its final exclamation reveals a poet overtaken, emotion pushed through the downturn of the previous line. The attempt to isolate everything in the past is counteracted by one more recollection, one which seems to amaze even the poet himself in its vividness, accuracy, and persistence in his mind. He is open and vulnerable here, the recollected image left on a line to speak for itself and a final flourish of punctuation that is frightfully close to melodrama. The challenge of reticence in the poet is how long he can hold off the inevitable, how long he can withhold what is in him until, unbidden, he releases.
As before, following a heightening of emotion, stanza three retreats with more questioning, more second-guessing. "Is it only the breeze?" asks the poet, in a gesture that we see, now, after experiencing the cloudy world of wish and dream, is only partially interested in literal certainty. The breeze (literal or imagistic) conveys a dissolution that is the antithesis to the crystalline final image of the stanza before. In his qualifying a more earthly source of the voice, the poet moves to dismiss this mushrooming memory (which will continue to grow despite his efforts of restraint). It is as if he hopes to either explain her away in meteorology or else capture her, simply, in meteorological metaphor.

As we have come to expect, and as the poem has come to be made of such attempts, she not be so easily tied down. That this breeze is more than natural phenomenon is apparent in its own description, in its *listlessness*. A breeze is amorphous, yet pervasive, and here personified it travels across unstable ground

toward the poet—what would have been a simple, uninspired image earlier in the poem echoes the haunting, pervasive, throat-blown air of the woman's calling, she herself held up in an air-blue gown.

In such a tightly-braided poem not one adverb is thrown away. "Here" as it is spoken end-of-line holds the almost invisible position of grammatical locator, but after the sharp distancing of the repeated "then"s, to find the opposite now, the closeness of "here" is devastating. Rather than provide the assured nearness, her placement face-to-face with the poet on the moors reveals their ultimate distance, the impossibility of returning to their fair days. At their nearest point the poet's sense of loss is greatest.

The next urge we also recognize, the address as though the poet, too, in the proximity in the line before, feels near enough to speak to her. What is remarkable here is the collapse of what were previously separate: the actual and the rhetorical. From the point of breeze as separate, dissolute figure felt adjacent to the woman and her voice (itself trailing) we turn to her own overt fading: "you being ever dissolved." While we recognize the second person pronoun as reference to the woman (she has always been the antecedent to "you" in this poem), this clause is subordinate to the first line of the stanza and the "you" therefore, and she therefore, *is* the breeze.

Even the rhyming, *listlessness* and *wistlessness* trailing off at the ends of their lines in loss, conveys a sense of dissolution in a kind of "emotional onomatopoeia." Then our awareness returns to the finality of the situation, the stanza's short last line like those previous monosyllabic lines, droning of logic and the actual.

> Heard no more again far or near?

She is gone and will never be truly heard again. Pain is in pervasiveness, as she dissolves she is easily slipped away, as away with the wind, but in return the obliteration and eternity of her—everywhere—in the wind. Not even in the language of the poem is there any escape. Despite an attempt to close the stanza in regular rhythm,

this whole quatrain is a question and so requires at its end a slight rise in vocal tone, a sense of the timelessness in the interrogative.

In this way we enter the space before the final stanza in tension, a dynamic that began inside the first line with her nearness calling into the poet's isolation, a tension that built down through the poem in his attempts to pull more near her and then the devastating impossibility that each proximity revealed. The poet places himself in this midst: "Thus I." In the space of both the stanza break and indention of the line, combined with the caesura, the first person stands alone, defiant, semicolon as point of reflection and the whole rest of the poem the poet's joy, exasperation, and turmoil in the wake of the voice: such am I.

Even in the last lines the poet will try to turn his head, to qualify his longing by explaining the voice away into the natural world. For a moment he places the voice as merely the wind again. But no longer will a turn to the landscape provide any escape. As her voice is the breeze so she is present in the loss of falling leaves, and this wind does not *float* or *soar*, it *oozes*. This wind, like the voice, like the woman of the voice, is inescapable, able to penetrate him anywhere, and she is sticky, haunting, knifelike thin.

The stanza itself is "faltering forward" with its indented and short lines and a broken syntax that leaves the first three lines dangling as a fragment. This is emotion revealed in syntax, the images again of fracture and falling apart:

> Thus I; faltering forward
> Leaves around me falling,
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,

Even the meter of the lines falters, beginning with a trochaic emphasis on the "f" alliteration after the caesura and continuing through the next line. Then the long line tied in by sharp sounds (leaves, oozing) before they stretch themselves thin with aspirated consonants ("thin through the thorn") and billow only in a late appearance of long "o"s. These lines, like so many others, put the poem squarely in the mouth, the vocalizing with which we hear the voice of the woman all through the poem. So tied

has this woman become to both a voice in the air and the exhaled air of breath and speech that a line so lush brings her immediately near. So near we find the poet once more almost breathless, choking towards retreat in the third person. This time, however, the impersonal noun is not without its tandem "you" (the two of them joined through the course of the poem until we will forever read "the woman" as "you") and the poet is just now pressed together by his collapsing language in the vice of contradiction and ambiguity. The wind *is* the voice, or else the voice really is a wind—*under* or *over* or *in* his head—the poet unsettled, longing,

And the woman calling.

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[1]Hardy's notebook of July 1, 1879, as quoted in Larkin, Philip. *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*. ed. by Anthony Thwaite. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993. 205-6.
[2] Some of my ideas on the context in which the Poems of 1912-13 fall come from "Hardy and the Ballads" Gunn, Thom. *The Occasions of Poetry*. 1982. Expanded edition. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985. 77-105. This essay was invaluable to me as a way to read Hardy.
[3] Larkin, *Letters* 166.
[4] Mandelstam, Osip. "Poem 24." *Stone*. trans. by Robert Tracy. London: Collins Harvill, 1991.
[5] Coleridge's argument is found paraphrased in Preminger, Alex. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. 62.

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