



Frederick Goddard Tuckerman

(1821-1873)

Sonnet XVI

Under the mountain, as when first I knew
Its low black roof, and chimney creeper-twined,
The red house stands; and yet my footsteps find
Vague in the walks, waste balm and feverfew.
But they are gone; no soft-eyed sisters trip
Across the porch or lintels; where, behind,
The mother sat,--sat knitting with pursed lip.
The house stands vacant in its green recess,
Absent of beauty as a broken heart;
The wild rain enters; and the sunset wind
Sighs in the chambers of their loveliness,
Or shakes the pane; and in the silent noons,
The glass falls from the window, part by part,
And ringeth in the grassy stones.

ANALYSIS

The most exacting of critics, a Neoclassical scourge of Romanticism, Yvor Winters wrote: "Tuckerman is unquestionably a distinguished poet: he is, however, a romantic in the essential sense; he divorces feeling from motive as far as possible. The beautifully executed sonnet beginning 'An upper chamber in a darkened house' is a perfect example of the procedure: a man is imagined in a tragic, but impenetrable, setting, to serve as the symbol of a feeling with which he has no connection and the source of which we are not given. Tuckerman is much like Hawthorne of the last romances, except that he writes better." *In Defense of Reason* (Alan Swallow 1937-1943) 262

Winters had great moral integrity. He is a moralist who considers a poem above all a moral statement. He dismisses all Romantics as fools. In the graduate courses I took from him at Stanford he refused even to discuss poets such as Keats, Frost and Cummings. He also thought novels should be poems and he had no mind for the allegories of Hawthorne. Nevertheless, he has much to teach and he serves as a uniquely rational lens, limited yet instructive.

Sonnet XVI renders the common human experience of returning to a place you loved a long time ago, only to find it reduced to ruin and the people there gone. The opening image of the mountain elevates perspective and establishes a solid permanence that contrasts with the brevity of human life--a theme common in the Romantic Movement--evoking the eternal in contrast to the transitory. Other characteristics of Romanticism are (1) emphasis on sensibility rather than reason or morality; (2) loving immersion in Nature; (3) primitive or mystical atmosphere; (4) nostalgia for something in the past.

The red house has a low black roof. Red is the color of passion and all three of the words *low*, *black* and *roof* suggest repression, apparently with respect to the "soft-eyed sisters," guarded by "the mother...with pursed lip." Apparently the mother never allowed the speaker to get close enough to the girls to choose one to fall in love with. Eventually he left. They are gone and the house without them is as "Absent of beauty as a broken heart." The rest of the sonnet renders feelings that follow from associating the red house with a heart, broken and falling to pieces. They are the feelings of the speaker. If the red house is a metaphor of his heart in this place, the "wild rain" is analogous to tears and the "sunset wind" to breath--to "sighs."

The line "Sighs in the chambers of their loveliness" extends the branching metaphor of the red house as his heart, with its chambers, and refers to the loveliness of the "soft-eyed sisters," making the word "pane" a pun. Time accelerates toward eternity like time-lapse photography as glass falls from "the window, part by part," exposing the interior to the "wild rain" and continuing to break like his heart. The swift slowness of passing time is paradoxical, a characteristic of literature in the transcendental mode, as are the setting in a wilderness and the presiding metaphor of a mountain in the Sky: The speaker is heart-broken, never getting over his loss, yet he is elevated by remembered love. The glass from the window of his heart, through which the mountain may be visible, falls onto stones that are hard like the mountain, yet also grassy. In the end he is looking down, the objective correlative for humble resignation.

The archaic word "ringeth" in the last line makes the poem timeless, as if it could have been written in the Middle Ages, because the human experience it renders is almost universal. The feelings expressed would be much the same for either gender and anybody almost anywhere. Tuckerman compensates for being general and vague to attain universality by also being extremely specific, concrete and vivid in his imagery. The vagueness has effects according to the iceberg principle. The feelings of the speaker seem to be more intense than what is called for given the known facts of his situation, enlarging the focus of the poem to the nature of life in general. The imagery, musical rhythms, atmosphere and poignant feeling in the poem are haunting, just as the speaker is haunted.

Michael Hollister (2015)