



The River-Merchant's Wife

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The Poem

Ezra Pound's adaptation of a poem by Li Bo, an eighth century Chinese poet, is a dramatic monologue spoken by a sixteen-year-old girl. It is written in open verse in the form of a letter from the wife of a river-merchant to her husband, who has been away from their home for five months.

The opening of the poem conveys both immediacy and continuance. The first line begins with the word "while" and presents an image of the wife as a young girl. The second line starts with the word "I" and contains an image of the girl playing at the moment when she met her future husband. The effect that is created is a feeling of recollection which draws time's passage across the consciousness of the present. The focus is shifted from the "I" to a memory of "you." The first stanza concludes with the couple merging into "we"—"small people" who lived in a village in a state of unreflective innocence.

The second stanza begins a triad of quatrains that recapitulate the three years of their marriage. In the first of these, the girl remembers herself at fourteen as severe, contained, and shy at the moment of the ceremony. She seemed to be acting out of obligation. Then, at fifteen, she began to relax and remembers that she "desired" to join her husband in both temporal and etherial realms, recognizing the immediate call of the physical as well as the transcendent appeal of the eternal. Her question that concludes the third stanza is a compression by Pound of a tale of a woman who waited on a tower for her husband's return. In his cryptic reference, he implies that the woman is content to be in her husband's company or to be by herself. The fourth stanza moves to the present, and the wife is now sixteen. Five months ago, the river-merchant had departed on some unexplained journey. He has covered considerable distance in both geographic and temporal terms, and the wife expresses her unhappiness.

The last section of the poem, an extended stanza of ten lines, is located entirely in the immediate present. It is a powerful expression of the wife's feelings and an attempt to demonstrate to the river-merchant how she has grown into a mature and more complete stage of love. Her references to the seasonal changes in the natural world indicate that she no longer entertains a concept of a theoretical love which is "forever and forever and forever" but has realized that nothing can exist outside of time. The image of mosses in an accumulation "too deep to clear them away!" suggests the effect of time's passage, and the image of "paired butterflies" shows that she is aware of love's delicacy and fragility. Her maturity is registered by the extremely powerful use of the only active verb in the poem: Her statement "They hurt me" refers to seasonal changes and their consequences. Her reflective utterance "I grow older" summarizes the range and scope of time that the poem encompasses.

The last part of this stanza contains a reversal of mood. Demonstrating her resiliency and depth of character, the wife now addresses her husband as an equal partner. Adopting an almost businesslike tone but maintaining her care and concern, she expresses her confidence in herself by declaring that she too will leave the protection of their home in order to meet him along the river Kiang. The willingness to travel along the river herself solidifies the relationship, and the reference to Cho-fu-Sa (Pound's version of the Chinese *Ch'ang-feng-sha* or "long wind beach") is a specific commitment to a particular place, rather than the previous nebulous "forever" of the second year of her marriage.

Forms and Devices

Pound wrote that “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Pound believed that the essence of this method, called Imagism, had been captured by the Chinese ideogram, which fused picture and meaning in one symbol.

The striking opening image of “The River-Merchant’s Wife” captures an entire cultural epoch. Pound originally used the American slang “bangs,” but the taut language of “hair was still cut straight” is an accurate rendering of the ideogram and of the appearance of young Chinese girls of that era. This image is followed by one of the river-merchant as a boy, his masculine aspects immediately established by his appearance “on bamboo stilts, playing horse” while she follows the traditional feminine activity of “pulling flowers.” Their early sensual attraction is implied by the boy parading around her and “playing with blue plums.”

The playful imagery of the first stanza is abruptly replaced by images of unease and uncertainty when the couple are actually married in her fourteenth year. She is presented as “scowling,” “bashful,” and never laughing. The wall is an image of enclosure and her desire to “mingle” their dust forever suggests claustrophobia and internment. The psychological condition of their first year of marriage has been precisely evoked.

When the river-merchant departs during the third year of their marriage, the images show how the girl’s sense of herself, her marriage, and the world is evolving. The river imagery (“swirling eddies” and “narrows”) indicates the dangers of the outside world. The husband, previously on stilts, now drags his feet under the pressure of responsibility. The wife’s sorrow is accentuated by seasonal references, the moss grown “too deep to clear” both a sign of time’s passage and a symbol for the weight of loneliness. The “paired butterflies” remind her of her single state, and her vision of them “already yellow with August” is a projection of her sense of accelerated time.

The final image of the poem is a parallel one in which the wife and her husband are both depicted on the river Kiang, its “narrows” demarking it as a place of menace. They are moving toward each other, their resolve to overcome obstacles a testament to the possibilities of a future in which the separate “I” and “you” of the poem will be joined as an unstated “we”—a union quite different from the separate lives of the “we” in the first stanza. This transference completes the cycle of shifting personal pronouns that functions as a frame for the imagery. From the introduction of the individual “I” and “you,” to Pound’s brilliant inversion “I married My Lord you” (which combines direct address with continuing personal consciousness), to the series of almost accusatory “you’s,” to the use of the third-person “they” to indicate fate in the last stanza, the variants anchor the images and reinforce their meanings.

Themes and Meanings

Pound’s introduction of poetry by Li Bo into the Western literary canon was a part of his program to increase cultural awareness. Pound viewed “criticism” in the largest sense to include versions of literary creation, such as “criticism by translation” and “criticism in new composition.” His adaptation of “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” was designed to open the field of early Chinese civilization to Western eyes, and he succeeded so well that T. S. Eliot remarked on the appearance of *Cathay* (1915) that it “invented Chinese poetry for our time.” Some professional sinologists attacked Pound for his lack of accuracy, but he dismissed their inability to appreciate the power of his poetry and his approach to translation.

Pound was interested in innovative uses of familiar forms, and he admired Robert Browning’s employment of dramatic monologue to capture the spirit of a moment in historic time. Pound believed that Browning’s work

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permitted a combination of the “human” or distinctly personal and the cultural, or socially resonant. Such crucial elements of “The River-Merchant’s Wife” as the correspondence of human emotion to natural setting, the representation of the eternal cycle of the seasons as time’s passage and human growth, and the linking of romantic intensity with restraint and composure are products of Pound’s fusion of Browning’s methods and Li Bo’s artistry.

Ford Madox Ford commented that “the poems in *Cathay* are things of supreme beauty. What poetry should be, that they are.” Pound took the ultimate vessel for expressing feeling—the lyric—and used its full capacity for transmitting essential human emotions within the mode of the dramatic monologue. Pound’s fervent proclamation that “nothing matters but the quality of affection” is the primary principle of his philosophy of composition and is at the heart of the appeal of “The River-Merchant’s Wife.” Without striking false notes or falling into sentimentality, Pound has shown that what he loved well—language, culture, and art—remains as his poetic legacy in his finest work.

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