

READING POUND : THREE

1. THE RIVER-MERCHANT'S WIFE: A LETTER

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever, and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden,
They hurt me.
I grow older,
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

by Rihaku.

Ezra Pound, from *Cathay* (London, 6th April 1915), reprinted in *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1952), pp. 140-1. The above text is from the *Cathay* printing, since the CSP text shews significant variants, particularly in lineation (lines 25-6, as above, become one line, as also in the *Pers* text, p. 134, but not in *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 252). The text printed in *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, with intro. by Hugh Kenner (London, 1953), implicitly purports to be that of *Cathay* but has also been tampered with. For other early English translations see Amy Lowell (with Florence Ayscough), *Fir-Flower Tablets* (London, 1921), pp. 28-9 (*Complete*

Poetical Works, ed. L. Untermeyer [Boston, 1955], p. 335); Witter Bynner, *The Jade Mountain* (1929) (*The Chinese Translations* [New York, 1978], pp. 113-4).

Pound made this translation from 'Rihaku' (i.e., Li Bai) from the annotated transcriptions made by Ernest Fenollosa; for a brief summary of this process see K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Personae' (1926)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 222 (his notes on the text are at pp. 205-6), and, more fully, Sanehide Kodama, *American Poetry and Japanese Culture* (Hamden, Conn., 1984), Chap. 3; Zhaoming Qian, *Orientalism and Modernism; The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams* (Durham, N.C., 1995), pp. 76-82. For the evidence that by the date of *Cathay* Pound knew well enough that 'Rihaku' was in fact Li Po (Li Bai), see Hugh Kenner, 'Notes on Amateur Emendations' in Lawrence S. Rainey (ed.), *A Poem Containing History; Textual Studies in 'The Cantos'* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1997), p. 25, and Wenxin Li, 'The Li Po that Ezra Pound Knew', *Paideuma*, 27 (1998), 81-89. For the contradiction between imagism's direct treatment of the thing and translation's indirect treatment of an historically remote discourse see Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism; Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 16-19; Pound's idea to treat the ideogram as itself a talismanic, prediscursive *thing* was inherently self-contradictory, premised upon his lack of joined-up understanding, but sanctioned by his belief that only by such means could discourse participate in the nature of the reality that it renders intelligible.

For more perceptive text-commentary see Christine Froula, *A Guide to Ezra Pound's 'Selected Poems'* ([New York], 1983), pp. 73-5; for overview see Achilles Fang, 'Fenollosa and Pound', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XX (1957), 213-38, and Ronald Bush, 'Pound and Li Po' in G. Bornstein (ed.), *Ezra Pound Among the Poets* (Chicago, 1985), pp. 35-62, esp. (on 'The River-Merchant's Wife') pp. 40-2. For critical overview of the dramatic monologue tradition, and its bearing specifically on Eliot's practice, see J.P. Riquelme, *Harmony of Dissonances; T.S. Eliot, Romanticism, and Imagination* (Baltimore and London, 1991), pp. 156-60, 320-5; Ronald Bush suggested that Eliot's procedures in 'Gerontion' perhaps specifically recalled 'The River Merchant's Wife' and its dramatising precision (Ronald Bush, *T.S. Eliot; A Study in Character and Style* [New York, 1983], p. 36; but on other strands in 'Gerontion' see James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History; Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* [Princeton, 1987], pp. 3-4, 189-94). For closer discussion of Pound's practice see Ming Xie, 'Elegy and Personae in Ezra Pound's "Cathay"', *ELH*, 60 (1993), 261-81; more fully, his *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry; 'Cathay', Translation, and Imagism* (New York, 1999), esp. pp. 114-19. Pound's version breaks the parallel couplet at lines 13-14, substituting 'Forever and forever, and forever' as a self-ironic echo of her naive trust in perpetuity; in 'I never looked back' he supplies a distantly sombre echo of Eurydice's fate. In his copy of *Cathay* (London, 1915), Yeats has altered l. 7 to read 'At fourteen we were married to one another'; also, l. 14 is cancelled; see Edward O'Shea (ed.), *A Descriptive Catalogue of W.B. Yeats's Library* (New York, 1985), p. 212. Bush comments astutely, about Pound's opening line: 'The word "still" here is Pound's invention, and not Li Po's' (in his 'Pound and Li Po', p. 41); compare 'also' in 'Fan-Piece for her Imperial Lord'. Smith considers all this transcultural manoeuvring a blatant 'confidence-trick'; see

Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism; Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Hemel Hempstead, 1994), p. 7.

For a yet further translation of Pound's version, into German ('Das Weib des Flusshändlers') see Eva Hesse (trans.), *Ezra Pound, Dichtung und Prosa* (West-Berlin, 1959), p. 63.

2. **THE BALLAD OF CH'ANG-KAN**
 (*The Sailor's Wife*)

I with my hair fringed on my forehead
 Breaking blossom, was romping outside:

And you rode up on your bamboo steed,
 Round our garden beds we juggled green plums;
 Living alike in Ch'ang-kan village
 We were both small, without doubts or guile . . .

When at fourteen I became your bride
 I was bashful and could only hide
 My face and frown against a dark wall:
 A thousand calls, not once did I turn;

I was fifteen before I could smile,
 Long to be one, like dust with ashes:
You'd ever stand by pillar faithful,
I'd never climb the Watcher's Mountain!

I am sixteen but you went away
 Through Ch'ü-t'ang Gorge, passing Yen-yü Rock
 And when in June it should not be passed,
 Where the gibbons cried high above you.

Here by the door our farewell footprints,
 They one by one are growing green moss,
 The moss so thick I cannot sweep it,
 And fallen leaves: Autumn winds come soon!

September now: yellow butterflies
 Flying in pairs in the west garden;
 And what I feel hurts me in my heart,
 Sadness to make a pretty face old . . .

Late or early coming from San-pa,
 Before you come, write me a letter:
 To welcome you, don't talk of distance,
 I'll go as far as the Long Wind Sands!

Li Bai, or Li Po (701-62), from Arthur Cooper (trans.), *Li Po and Tu Fu* (Penguin Classics; Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 125-6. Pound perhaps did not

know that the original poem was probably one of a pair, since the second poem has sometimes been excluded from the canon; Cooper translates both poems, and provides a first-rate brief commentary ('The poem is a love-poem to his wife but written as if from her to him, which was a common practice at the time'--p. 127). For another modern translation of both poems see, e.g., Elling Eide (trans.), *Poems by Li Po* (Lexington, Ky., 1983), XXVII, 1-2 (pp. 39-40). For an idea of the method and problems of such translation see David Hawkes, *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (Oxford, 1967; reprinted, Hong Kong, 1987). David Hinton in a note to his translation, *The Selected Poems of Li Po* (London, 1996), comments that 'there is no reason to think that the husband is a river-merchant' (p. 125). It is useful to know (maybe Pound did) that all marriages at this time were arranged by family match-makers: the girl probably had no part at all in the arrangements. Also, already by the start of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) a vast network of canals and canalized rivers had been constructed, to connect northern and western with east-central China and to carry, silk, salt, trading goods and above all grain (see Gernet, *History of Chinese Civilisation*, pp. 238-42); rich merchants controlled fleets of river-vessels whose crews led a hard life with long absences from home. The places named in this poem, entrepôts and danger-spots on the Yangtze waterway system, are very widely separated (though the Japanese transliterations suggest that Pound didn't know this directly). On the traditional danger of these gorges see Hinton's note, p. 129; on the emotional geography see Bush, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-2.

Beneath the surface of Pound's version we may sense the effects of many features of Chinese social practice which Pound could not know and must therefore intuit. The uneasiness of the young wife relates to the Confucian values which insist on her husband as the sole source of validation in their union; and his expertise is the merchandising of goods and their exchange values: relative market prices. She by contrast clings to an alternative romantic scheme of values, of tender constant affection, all too vulnerable, as clearly she recognises, to the erosion of distance and absence. Her only protection is both a demure self-irony ('for ever and ever and ever') and the implicit pain of unguarded affectionate totality; even this is ironised in the anecdotes about 'climbing the lookout' (a reference to legendary romantic loyalties which Pound evidently didn't comprehend). This is her only negotiating asset, and not wishing to play the market she keeps all her feelings to herself; thus feeling them more sharply as the price of continuing hope and trust, even despite all the omens of seasonal change and the shifts of time. Neither eager (running out too far) nor timid (not leaving the house) she will go just so far to meet him, her delicate modesty traced out by the mute space of the indented last line (which in Cooper's version carries a clumsy exclamation mark, not of course in the Chinese). Pound's skill lies in the exceptionally acute reconstruction by nuance and obliquity of this most complex state of internal feeling; a skill learned (perhaps) from Browning.

3.

Chokanko

regular 5
 name of town
 Chokan= ko=uta=narrative song
 place
 long-Mt. side

Sho hatsu sho fuku gaku
 mistress hair first cover brow

Chinese lady's I or my beginning
 My hair was at first covering my brows.
 (Chinese method of wearing hair)

Setsu kwa mon zen geki
 break flowers gate front play
 Breaking flower branches I was frolicking in front of our gate.

ro ki chiku ba rai
 Second person ride on bamboo horse come
 masculine
 you, young man
 lit. young man
 When you came riding on bamboo stilts

Gio sho ro sei bai
 Going round seat play with blue plums (fruit)
 And going about my seat, you played with the blue plums.

Do kio cho kan ri
 Same dwell cho kan village
 Together we dwelt in the same Chokan village.

rio sho mu ken sai
 double small not dislike suspicion
 "the two"
 And we two little ones had neither mutual dislike or suspicion.
 (no evil thots or bashfulness)

ju shi i kun fu
 Fourteen became lord's wife
 your

At fourteen I became your wife--

shu gan mi jo kai
 bashful face not yet ever open
 Bashful I never opened my face (I never laughed)

Tei to ko am peki
 lowering head face black wall
 but lowering my head I always faced towards a dark wall ashamed
 to see anybody--she sat in dark corners

Sen kan fu itsu kai
 thousand call not once look back
 And though a thousand times called, not once did I look around.....

ju go shi tem bi
 15 first time open eyebrows

At fifteen I first opened my brows

i.e.

I first knew what married life meant now she opens her eyebrows.
 i.e. smoothes out the wrinkles between her brows. She now began
 to understand love, and to be happy.

Gan do jin yo bai
 desire same dust together with ashes
 and

And so I desired to live and die with you even after death, I wish
 to be with you even as dust, and even as ashes--partially together.

Jo son ho chu shin
 eternally preserve embrace pillar faith
 I always had in me the faith of holding to pillars.

Ki jo bo fu dai
 Why should climb look out husband terrace
 And why should I think of climbing the husband looking out terrace.

ju roku kun en ko
 16 you far go.

At 16, however, you had to go far away.

fearful riverside both yen & yo are adj. expressing form of
 water passing over hidden rocks

Ku to yen yo tai

name
 of locality yenyo-rock
 eddy?

(towards Shoku passing through the difficult place of Yenyotai at Kuto.)

Go getsu i ka shoku
 5 month not must touch

In May not to be touched.

The ship must be careful of them in May.

En sei ten jo ai
 monkeys voices heaven above sorrowful
 Monkeys cry sorrowful above heaven.

Mon zen chi ko seki
 gate front late go footstep
 reluctant

Your footsteps, made by your reluctant departure, in front of our gate.

