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Source: *ELH*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 261-281

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873314>

Accessed: 23-02-2018 11:47 UTC

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ELEGY AND PERSONAE IN EZRA POUND'S *CATHAY*

BY MING XIE

Pound first published his *Personae* in 1909, including two previous collections of his poems. The title "Personae" was used again for his collected poems of 1926, and for the selection from these of 1928. That Pound attached great importance to the idea of personae is best summed up in his "Vorticism" of September 1914, in which he called his translations as well as his poems but a series of "elaborate masks."¹ By the time he wrote this, Pound had already possessed the literary manuscripts left by Ernest Fenollosa for about a year and had begun working on them, including the poems that were to make up his *Cathay*. Pound no doubt also had his Chinese poems in mind when he spoke of "casting off" complete masks of the self in his translations. In 1920, he again referred to "The Seafarer," *Cathay*, and "Homage to Sextus Propertius" as his "major personae."² Yet these Chinese poems were significantly different from his previous experiments with personae. His previous personae were, as Hugh Kenner puts it, "deliberate dramatizations which extend the modes of thinking and feeling accessible to the quotidian inhabitant of a given London decade."³ And the connection with Browningsque dramatic monologue was often superficial, in that Pound was more interested in the idea of the intense lyrical moment. But what sharply distinguishes Pound from the Victorian masters of the elegiac before him, with the partial exception of Browning, is his skillful and extensive reliance upon the speaker-persona as the primary device for rendering subjective emotion and elegiac mood, as amply and successfully demonstrated in *Cathay*.

Pound was consciously using his *Cathay* translations as a counterbalance against what he saw to be the droning of a corrupt elegiac lyricism, as is in his view characteristic of much mid- and late-Victorian poetry.⁴ The speakers in Tennyson's dramatic monologues often seem to drown in a certain dramatically deliberate exaggeration of their melancholy mood. Yet this kind of masterly control and modulation of elegiac cadence and dramatic contrast, not at all rare in Tennyson at his best, was also frequently susceptible to the risk of overly dramatized pathetic excessiveness, particularly in the later imitation or parody of this cadence by lesser Tennysonian epigones. Consider the

following version of Kêng Wei's "Lonely" as translated by Herbert Giles:

The evening sun slants o'er the village street;
My griefs alas! in solitude are borne;
Along the road no wayfarers I meet,—
Naught but the autumn breeze across the corn.⁵

The diction of this version has the effect of setting poems in an unspecified period of a romanticized past, and also of naturalizing whatever is poetically different and individualized in an alien poem. Giles's debased and streamlined Victorian elegiac cadence and movement weigh so heavily that the original Chinese poem all but disappears.

To put the late Victorian elegiac tradition in perspective, we might go to Coleridge who provides a succinct formulation in 1833:

Elegy is the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It *may* treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject *for itself*; but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of elegy. Elegy presents every thing as lost and gone, or absent and future. The elegy is the exact opposite of the Homeric, in which all is purely external and objective, and the poet is a mere voice.⁶

Arnold is of course often ambivalent about the elegiac aspects of his poetry, and criticizes this aspect of his work in his "Preface" to the "Poems of 1853," where he contends strongly against poetry as an allegory of the poet's state of mind and strongly for poetry as representation of an action: "What is *not* interesting, is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived and loosely drawn; a representation which is general, indeterminate, and faint, instead of being particular, precise, and firm. . . . What are the eternal objects of poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions. . . ."⁷ But in practice Arnold is often drawn to elegy and the elegiac even though in his best poems he attempts to exorcise this characteristic collusion.

Arnold's "A Summer Night" provides a prominent example of the nineteenth-century displaced elegy, that is, a poem devising the location and occasion for the feeling expressed by elevated fancy rather than speaking from a context that is literally the predicament of such feeling:

In the deserted, moon-blanch'd street,
How lonely rings the echo of my feet!

Those windows, which I gaze at, frown,
Silent and white, unopening down,
Repellent as the world; but see,
A break between the housetops shows
The moon! and, lost behind her, fading dim
Into the dewy dark obscurity
Down at the far horizon's rim,
Doth a whole tract of heaven disclose!

(MA, 282)

This kind of poem for the most part depends for its effect upon associative meanings generated from within the frame set up by the poet, so that the whole subject matter of the poem is thoroughly subordinated to the dominant emotional or psychological mood imposed by the poet himself. Thus the poet's attention is almost solely devoted to his own elegiac states of mind, without any effort to ground such feelings in the immediate, circumscribed actualities that surround the poet or the poetic persona in the first place. Even when actualities *are* presented, as often they are with great brilliance and precision by the early Tennyson, they are tacit but unmistakable "objective correlative" devices for expression of prevailing mood; as Eliot succinctly puts it in his essay on "In Memoriam," Tennyson characteristically uses dramatic situation as the occasion for "stating an elegiac mood."⁸

Pound's use of the elegiac is quite different. Consider his version of Tao Ch'ien's "To-Em-Mei's 'The Unmoving Cloud,'" for example:

The clouds have gathered, and gathered,
and the rain falls and falls,
The eight ply of the heavens
are all folded into one darkness,
And the wide, flat road stretches out.
I stop in my room toward the East, quiet, quiet,
I pat my new cask of wine.
My friends are estranged, or far distant,
I bow my head and stand still.⁹

Here the sensibility and susceptibility of the poet functions as an impersonal agency for the mood of the persona, giving a complete primacy to the narrative situation from which that mood arises and not appropriating or contaminating it with any oblique opportunism on the part of the poet. The poet establishes the persona as the source and primary sanction for feeling and then tunes his own mood into a matching sympathetic resonance. Pound's version has objectified successfully a mood of the persona, and it invites the reader to experience

the distinctness of that mood. This mood is not the same as the Tennysonian elegiac mood which depends for its effect on the reader's more or less subjective identification and often exhibits a progressive, tacit conflation between lyrical mood, the ostensibly dramatized occasion for speech, and the reader's emotional response—a notable aspect of Tennyson's "power of embodying himself in ideal characters," in the words of his friend Arthur Hallam, "or rather moods of characters, with such extreme accuracy of adjustment, that the circumstances of the narration seem to have a natural correspondence with the predominant feeling, and, as it were, to be evolved from it by assimilative force."¹⁰ Hugh Kenner has commented at length on Pound's version:

The objects, the images, clouds, rain, darkness, the wide flat road, exist not as stage-dressing, as atmospheric props for a display of the writer's chagrin, but as a constellation intrinsically and inevitably related to the inherent mood. (This is a manner of speaking; whether these relationships "existed" before the poet made his stanza is irrelevant to our technical inquiry). They are allotropic components into which the mood, the initial poetic "idea," has been fragmented. Nor is the mood threadbare and familiar, existing for the reader as an evoked memory. It is particular and new.¹¹

However, the rhythm and implied outlook of the description in T'ao Ch'ien's original poem firmly imply a central and sponsoring *consciousness*, a center of dramatized personal awareness, which at once functions as the focus and reference for a coherence of implicit feeling as it gradually declares itself by what is observed and what is thought. The explicit tense-logic of the grammar in Pound's version positions a meditative self in a present moment, made desolate by nostalgic contrast with past memories, whereas in more condensed imagistic presentations, this implied consciousness would be denied controlling coherence of a unified mood and may be either reduced or excluded altogether, replaced instead by various other *techniques* such as those of brevity, juxtaposition, and so on.

Michael Alexander suggests that "*Cathay* is in many ways a deeply Tennysonian volume in its matter, its colour, its emotion. But its versification, melody, use of image and directness of language are indeed very different. This difference presents itself primarily as a difference in the 'nature', in the actual landscape. . . ."¹² Certainly the use of landscape or natural imagery in classical Chinese poetry most frequently suggests and embodies an inexorable sense of melancholy and elegiac mood. But the crucial point here is that, though

there is a thematic and modal correlation of melancholy thoughts and feelings with expanses of rain-washed landscapes, for the Edwardian or Georgian English reader the codes for these Chinese landscapes, linking them to understood conventions of feeling, were so different that the mood seemed to arise directly from the disjunct economies of description. Vast and empty expanse of water or mountain; imminent snow or darkening twilight; falling rain over a lake or river; solitary human figures in mist: these are a few of the most common images used by various Chinese poets and painters, mostly of the T'ang and Sung period, to suggest a kind of metaphysical loneliness and their elegiac consolation through submerging their subjectivity in the natural landscape itself. Quite often in Chinese poetry no immediate occasion is invoked at all and the feeling of solitude and consolation seems universalized, by means of diminished foreground, although the individual viewer is positioned along various points of the landscape.

This phenomenon in Chinese poetry has much in common with the diffuse and dynamic perspective in many Chinese landscape paintings. Parts of the represented field of view are separated from other parts, and are treated as if remote or floating with reference to the human figures "tethering" the mood to its focus; yet the formal articulation and composition of these levels and zones of separation allow the viewer to read the picture-surface, its recessions and elevations, as coherently *viewed*: this is a kind of ordering and ordered perspective usually called a "parallel perspective" or a "multiple station-point." Earlier Chinese landscape views of more panoramic or extended vertical dimension (lofty mountains and great waterfalls, for example) assumed several separate viewpoints, so that the viewer was "imagined as standing point blank in front of that part of the surface on which the object is presented."¹³ The effacement of subjective feeling, the presence of cosmic melancholy, the enormous scale of natural landscape, the absence of personal pronouns: all these help to make up a distinctive class of poems of pictorial solitude and plaintive consolation. These qualities have been well captured by Pound, in the opening lines of his canto 49, which is based on a series of Chinese landscape poems inscribed on paintings:

Rain; empty river; a voyage,
Fire from frozen cloud, heavy rain in the twilight
Under the cabin roof was one lantern.
The reeds are heavy; bent;
and the bamboos speak as if weeping.¹⁴

“And the bamboos speak *as if* weeping”: had this piece been an attempt at imagist writing, the younger Pound would surely have struck out this weakly explicit comparative. Yet here it is just, and it works, because the “surface” description of natural objects, while displacing any explicit expression of hidden emotion, also dramatizes the displaced and thus invisible depth of that emotion. Generically, the notable thing about these poems in canto 49 is their extreme brevity, since in nineteenth-century (and also earlier) English poetry the elegy invariably implies and occasions a more developed amplitude of expression. Yet the fragmented appearance of Pound’s images is deceptive, for paradoxically there is a strongly implied presence of narrative continuity: the semicolons here function similarly as the colon in that they are quasi-narrative markers which point both forward and backward and thus link the seemingly isolated images into an implied sequence of expressive narration.

Cathay was published in April 1915, with Pound’s Anglo-Saxon adaptation “The Seafarer” included between “The Exile’s Letter” and the “Four Poems of Departure.” The whole collection could be construed as having a topical meaning and significance when it first appeared, as probably the “Seafarer” insertion was originally meant to suggest a certain implicit relation between the thematic formula of the book and the emotional register of Europe at the beginning of the First World War.¹⁵ Indeed, Kenner thinks that *Cathay* is “largely a war book, using Fenollosa’s notes much as Pope used Horace or Johnson Juvenal, to supply a system of parallels and a structure of discourse” by means of “an oriental obliquity of reference.”¹⁶ This is no doubt true. From among the diverse wealth of the Fenollosa notes for Chinese poems at Pound’s disposal at the time, he selected only a dozen or so to make up *Cathay*, evidently more interested in the type of poems that embrace themes of war and exile, separation and heroism, and other related themes.¹⁷

Again, the coupling of “The Seafarer” with “The Exile’s Letter” in particular is significant for Pound, who believes that the *Seafarer* is the only European poem of the period that can be weighed on the same scale as Li Po’s “The Exile’s Letter.”¹⁸ Pound’s sense of the equivalence of the two poems is more than a mere comparison in terms of the national literatures they are supposed to represent. Pound’s secularization of the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* is not motivated by sheer textual considerations: “The groundwork may have been a longer narrative poem, but the ‘lyric’, as I have accepted it, divides fairly well into ‘The Trials of the Sea’, its Lure and the Lament for Age.”¹⁹ Pound’s

emphasis on the “lyric” suggests that he regarded *The Seafarer* as a dramatic lyric. The unhesitant dramatic quality of feeling and mood and the directness of address in the form of the dramatic lyric link Pound’s “The Seafarer” with poems like “The Exile’s Letter” or “The River-Merchant’s Wife: a Letter,” and the poet of *The Seafarer* with “Rihaku,” with Pound presiding over both. It is the elegiac genre and theme of exile that led Pound to translate *The Seafarer* as we have it now. Pound stresses the elements of exile and solitude and nostalgia even more than the original Anglo-Saxon poem.²⁰ The Anglo-Saxon elegy deals chiefly with the theme of exile, as different from the tradition of the classical pastoral elegy. Though it is strongly conditioned by its generic and rhetorical formulae, *The Seafarer* clearly exhibits a dramatization and projection of subjective mood, the emotional predicament inherent in a mode of life given individual focus in an explicitly personal narrative, as is similarly the case in Pound’s “The Exile’s Letter” with its form of personal statement and individualized narrative.²¹ “The Seafarer” and “The Exile’s Letter” share a similarity of attitude and value in their respective personae—a recognizable type of individual predicament (seafarer and exile) and a defiance through indifference to conventional attitudes. It is thus possible for Pound to enact, through his adopted Anglo-Saxon and Chinese masks, his own personal and historical situation. Although never unmistakably explicit, this meaning is nevertheless implied clearly enough. In selecting the group of “Rihaku” poems of exile and solitude, Pound follows his own generic considerations, and in translating them, develops his own generic framework and personal style which have been determinants for the later writings in the *Cantos*.

The sense of exile and estrangement is also markedly different from melancholy: this is perhaps why Pound deliberately introduces a strong note of antibourgeois stringency into his version of *The Seafarer*.²² With the *Cathay* poems, he tries to employ radical structural strategies, for example, a greater reliance on and exploitation of the individual speaker in each poem.²³ In these poems Pound follows the prosaic realism of the original Chinese and accentuates the particular emotional and psychological qualities that reside within the completeness of each individual speaker. “The River-Merchant’s Wife: a Letter” and “The River Song” are examples of this strategy.

Pound’s own gradual evolution from his experiments with the “hokku-like” sentences, the epigrams and epitaphs in the earlier poems, to the longer *Cathay* poems in which the elegiac mood prevails, indicates his gradual generic modulation of the epigrammatic into the

elegiac, paralleled by his developing theory of the Image. As a result Pound extended the repertoire of elegy by modulating it into a mixture of styles and moods: the epigrammatic, the rhetorical, the dramatic, the narrative, the epistolary, and so on, all to be unified in a cluster of simple, natural and distinct images.

The connection between Pound's haiku images and his earlier epigrams might be viewed as the logical precedent for what he sets out to do in the *Cathay* poems. Alastair Fowler suggests that "rejection of Victorian poetic diction by the modernists has had the indirect effect of making the survival of elegiac poetry depend on epigram, which now provides its usual external form."²⁴ David Lindley's distinction between epigram and elegy is also extremely suggestive here: "Where epigram pushes the lyric towards compression, elegy opens it, among other things, to quasi-personal 'passionate meditation.'"²⁵ It might be said that Pound's apparent ignorance of Chinese and Chinese literary forms has perhaps enabled him to modulate and transpose freely the original Chinese poems in terms adapted to his own generic experiments and expressive considerations. He was perhaps fortunate enough not to be in a position to render literally from the original Chinese; he evidently derived a stimulus to innovate forms of a more immediate expressiveness from this ostensibly unpromising activity, that of translating from a language not fully understood. His Provençal versions, by contrast, do not have this radical directness.

Pound's "Lament of the Frontier Guard," for instance, shows his ability to handle creatively, yet still under constraints, Fenollosa's notes for the poem:

By the North Gate, the wind blows full of sand,
 Lonely from the beginning of time until now!
 Trees fall, the grass goes yellow with autumn.
 I climb the towers and towers
 to watch out the barbarous land:
 Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.

(CSP, 143)

It is notable that Pound's new title for the poem makes the poem a monologue spoken by the guard: what in the original is the "barbarian pass" (*hu-kuan*), the whole corridor across which the invaders push southwards, is for Pound "the North Gate": it is but the last outpost of the empire left to be defended by those posted to it. Thus the guard is lonely, hence the whole place is so; the "desolation" of that emptiness is personalized by the voice which speaks of it: the guard's tour of duty seems to last for ever, in its wearisome isolation, and yet it is the

briefest interval in a vast expanse of time matching the vastness of space.

Pound here has grasped the latent psychology of this contrast, following the hints from Fenollosa, because he was ready to import a little of Browning's psychology of dramatic mood, entitling the poem as "The *Lament* of the Frontier Guard" (Li Po's title is simply "Ancient Style, No. 14"), to bring in a central defining pronoun "I" (Li Po's poem does not specify the singularly personal speaker) as the locus or pivot for these contrasts: thus trees, formerly standing "naturally," fall to the ground, but towers and castles, built by man, hold out against this wastage of time. Yet by an irony already latent in the mood of the "lament" the wastage of time will eventually destroy all the works of man, the high heaps again covered with natural vegetations:

Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.
There is no wall left to this village.
Bones white with a thousand frosts,
High heaps, covered with trees and grass;

(CSP, 143)

In the Chinese line "desolate-castle-empty-vast-desert," the middle character "empty" is ambiguous enough to serve both as a "verb" reinforcing "vast desert" and as a "verb" (past participial in this case) looking back to "desolate castle": the desolate castle *made more empty* by the vastness of the desert. Pound's version captures this pivotal image in its complexity as well as its simplicity. Partly the complexity is given by the interactive ambiguities of the key terms at the start and finish of the line, with their associations and overtones in English: "desolate" and "desert." The castle is *desolate* because as a far outpost it is solitary and alone, far from human habitation, on the edge of the barren emptiness which is the *desert*. But the dreary sorrow of personal isolation and wretchedness is matched by seeing the barbarous lands as *deserted*, forlorn and abandoned. All these aspects interact and empty their senses into the vast neutral emptiness of *sky*: "Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert."

And sorrow, sorrow like rain.
Sorrow to go, and sorrow, sorrow returning.
Desolate, desolate fields,
And no children of warfare upon them,
No longer the men for offence and defence.

(CSP, 143)

Here omitting the word “tears” supplied by Fenollosa’s crib, Pound has grafted “like rain” straight on to “sorrow, sorrow,” thus effecting a memorable abstract-concrete simile. Since in Western tradition fighting soldiers are not supposed to weep at their posts but instead often turn their emotion into a kind of half-joke, as in the exotic last line of Pound’s version, the overall shape and development of sorrowful feeling is itself “translated”: “A gracious spring, turned to blood-ravenous autumn, / A turmoil of wars-men, spread over the middle kingdom” (CSP, 143). Note the tacit pun on ravening/raven (the carrion bird of ill omen on the battlefield), and the comparably tacit reference to heroic warrior-elegy in the north-European tradition in Pound’s line near the end of the poem: “Ah, how shall you know the *dreary* sorrow at the North Gate.” “Dreary,” from the Anglo-Saxon *dreorig*, means dark with spilled blood. Pound here assembles and draws upon his latent precedents, to diagnose and express the fundamental mood of the poem. The word “dreary,” in variant archaic forms, also appears in Pound’s “The Seafarer” (CSP, 79) and in canto 1 (C, 4).

It must be stressed here, though, that the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* represents a kind of proto-elegy in which the primitive oral element predominates, whereas the more modern kind of elegy or elegiac poem is distinctively personal. The generic framework of classical elegy has gradually evolved into the poem of the elegiac mood during the major part of the nineteenth century. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* would be a pivotal example, because it was so complex and so massively influential. In the late eighteenth century, Gray (“Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”), Goldsmith (“The Deserted Village”) and Cowper (“The Poplar-Field”) had defined for later Romanticism and the whole nineteenth century “the elegiac tone as a mood rather than as a formal mode.”²⁶ “Farm House on the Wei Stream” by the T’ang poet Wang Wei, as translated by Amy Lowell, reminds one of the elegiac poems by Goldsmith (his “The Deserted Village” for example):

The slanting sun shines on the cluster of small houses upon
the heights.
Oxen and sheep are coming home along the distant lane.
An old countryman is thinking of the herd-boy,
He leans on his staff by the thorn-branch gate, watching.
Pheasants are calling, the wheat is coming into ear,
Silk-worms sleep, the mulberry-leaves are thin.
Labourers, with their hoes over their shoulders, arrive;
They speak pleasantly together, loth to part.
It is for this I long—unambitious peace!
Disappointed in my hopes, dissatisfied, I hum “Dwindled
and Shrunk.”²⁷

Of course, it is the community which has “dwindled” for Goldsmith, as the rural population leave the fields of their forefathers; whereas in the more individualized personal mood-elegy it is the individual speaker who is isolated and unhappy from the separating consciousness and sometimes tacit self-congratulation of his own sorrowfulness. The narrative and thus prospective element diminishes as the retrospective element increases, eventually to produce an overwhelming mood devouring everything: this is what Pound was to see as the corrupt elegiac lyricism most typical in Victorian poetry. However, first-person autobiographical elegy is a much more difficult case, because it is frequently the *ambiguity* of the self or person presented that may cause the reader the greatest difficulty. Arthur Waley’s version of “The Chrysanthemum in the Eastern Garden” by Po Chü-i is one such example:

The days of my youth left me long ago;
And now in their turn dwindle my years of prime.
With what thoughts of sadness and loneliness
I walk again in this cold, deserted place!
In the midst of the garden long I stand alone;
The sunshine, faint; the wind and dew chill.
The autumn lettuce is tangled and turned to seed;
The fair trees are blighted and withered away.
All that is left are a few chrysanthemum-flowers
That have newly opened beneath the wattled fence.²⁸

Here within the objective setting of the garden the elegiac self tries to establish its own present validity and solidity by way of reflection and *anagnorisis*; yet the very identity of this self is threatened by the multiple functions it tries to embrace: the elegiac self is both the focus and occasion of present feeling, while also serving as the free epitome of its recognition. In addition there is the bound subjectivity of the first-person self. Across the pattern of these shifting relations the reader’s position is not at all easily determined.

By contrast, Pound consciously strives for the clear presentation of narrative and emotion and displays a much more effective use of the dramatic lyric medium to render precisely the predicament of the original Chinese protagonists. And here the elegiac poetry of Thomas Hardy can serve as a useful comparison. Pound has said that Hardy “woke one to the extent of his own absorption in *subject* as contrasted with aesthetes’ preoccupation with ‘treatment.’”²⁹ “Hardy at his best stems out of Browning, as Ford does, and does so by shedding his encrustation.”³⁰ Pound praises Hardy’s elegies of 1912–1913 as the best among Hardy’s poems. The *Cathay* poems also display the importance

of a certain kind of provincialism of feeling, feeling deeply rooted in details of the actual circumscribed world of the protagonists. In this respect they closely resemble Hardy's "dramatic or personative" poems, especially those from his *Poems of 1912-13*: "The Going," "The Voice," "After a Journey," and "A Wet August," for example, though Hardy is frequently more dramatic and ironic.³¹ But the similarities abound: both Pound and Hardy are often concerned with the reality of memory and retrospection, regret and melancholy, time and consolation. One chief characteristic of Hardy's speaking voice in the first-person elegiac poem which differentiates him from Pound is the ghostly, barren, and depersonalized present self as compared to the vitality and personal involvements of the remembered past life: this is a principal irony for Hardy, that the narrating voice is always belated in regard to the events which have meaning for it, isolated in an empty present in which memory can be called upon but no longer shared, except vicariously, with the reader.

The use of natural imagery in the *Cathay* poems is often of primary importance. There is a natural relation of the natural setting to the speaking and observing persona in the poems, as well as a sense of distance that separates the observer or speaker from the natural world that he or she observes. But the resulting tension is precisely what is most important in any good poem.³² Here Pound differs from Hardy's procedure, partly because of the translator's constraints but more importantly because of Pound's complete trust in the matter of his Chinese poems: there is no arbitrary or dramatic staging of either personae or natural images for certain subjective effects. In Hardy's verse the inevitability of emotion and sadness often combines with the installation of certain particular figures or scenes to produce an elaborate apparatus for capturing and rendering past experiences.³³ Most of the *Cathay* poems do not exhibit this elaborateness with regard to both scene and persona; these poems seem more reticent in their articulation of personal loss and sadness. For example, the image of "flowers falling" at the end of Pound's version of "The Exile's Letter" by Li Po functions both as a reminder of the distance between the persona and the natural setting and as the persona's subjective identification with the natural world:

And if you ask how I regret that parting:
It is like the flowers falling at Spring's end
Confused, whirled in a tangle.

(CSP, 146)

Such images exhibit the sense of control and restraint, so characteristic of much of Chinese poetry, in the expression of strong emotion and feeling, especially passionate love between man and woman.³⁴ Such reticence and impassivity are very well conveyed in most English translations from the Chinese, including those of Arthur Waley. But it must have suited Waley to maintain a coyly decorous absence of recognizably particular and overtly personal emotion in Chinese poetry, a kind of Edwardian or Georgian reticence and understatement about personal and intimate feelings. Pound himself in part suffers from this coyness of his age, while trying hard to shake it off. As for Hardy, characteristically, all passion lies in the past, so for Pound it was often found most alive in the forms of alien and remote cultures, whereas Waley by contrast has sought to bury passionate expression of feeling or emotion in respectable discretion and understatement.

Pound has complete trust in the subject-matter of the poems he translates; the emotions of the personae in these poems are completely real for him. He is always seeking out specific European cognates whenever he discusses Chinese poetry. The form and subject-matter of "The River-Merchant's Wife: a Letter," for example, has its cognates in European literary traditions too: especially in some of Browning's poems such as "Men and Women" which, Pound believes, belong to the tradition of Ovid's "Heroides" and Theocritus' idyls, while the special feature of Li Po's poem is its grace and simplicity.³⁵ The "simplicity" and beauty of this poem (both the original Chinese poem and Pound's version of it) consist chiefly in the convincing speaking voice of the persona, yet full of emotional maturity and sophistication.

A. R. Orage believed that Pound's "The Seafarer" is "a little less perfect; it has not the pure simplicity of its Chinese exemplars. On the other hand, it is as we should expect, a little more manly in its sentiment." Orage also noted the similarity between Browning's "Bishop Bloughram's Apology" and Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: a Letter" in terms of their "natural" simplicity: "The difference is that Browning was 'perfecting' the expression of a powerful and subtle mind, while Rihaku was perfecting the mind relatively of a child. The extension of the directness and simplicity, the veracity and the actuality aimed at by vers libristes, into the subtler regions than the commonplace is advisable if they are not to keep in the nursery of art."³⁶ Perhaps deliberately, Pound has brought over and constructed the image of a tender, ordinary, yet emotionally sophisticated and mature woman in his rendition of "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.

(CSP, 140)

In Pound's version the emotion of the woman speaker is presented within her confined perspective through particular stages of emotional development and psychological retrospection, out of which emerge different shades of meaning and significance. It is significant that Pound finds it necessary to divide the original Chinese poem into different stanzas or strophes, in order to delineate more sharply and contrastively the successive stages of retrospection and revelation. In the original Chinese poem, due to lack of specified relations of tense or number, the narrative sequence is not explicitly established by the syntactical markers. It is therefore all the more difficult for the English translator to grasp the intimations of feeling and attitude in the original and to devise an effective inner logic of psychological development.

Thus the English translator is called upon to utilize whatever resources in English he or she can muster, in order to present a convincing structure of feeling and sensibility in a new English poem.³⁷ The word "still" in Pound's first line, for instance, is absent from both the original Chinese poem and Fenollosa's transcriptions. Pound's "still" thus introduces into the narrative a prefigured sense of lost innocence, nostalgic pleasure, and subsequent frustration from the point of view of the woman speaker before she married her present "Lord." Her girlish confidence in perpetual romance is implicit in "Forever and forever and forever" (this is, in fact, Pound's addition), because the ironies inherent in life had by that stage not yet made

their first appearance: at the start of the poem the reader is asked to recognize that he, as a reader, knows more of what is to come than she does (“still”). A sense of retrospective ambivalence and nostalgia is thereby subtly implied.

If in the first part of the “River-Merchant’s Wife: a Letter” he more or less follows Fenollosa’s original phrasings, Pound departs significantly from them in the second half in terms of rhythm and speech representation as necessitated by his own adopted strategy of translating the poem into a dramatic lyric, a structure of feeling generated from within the speaking persona.³⁸

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.

(CSP, 141)

This is a strikingly direct presentation of emotional nakedness of the woman speaker, dramatizing as it does the subtleties of love, sorrow and ambivalence by closely following the inner speech rhythm of the speaker herself. Pound’s “The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind,” modifying Fenollosa’s notes but still retaining the essentials, wonderfully recreates the emotional implication of the Chinese line as a whole.³⁹ It is comparable to Hardy’s closing lines in the “The Voice” (1912). In Pound’s “River-Merchant’s Wife: a Letter,” there is a complex psychological interaction between the tone of playful, childish innocence, carefree and ironically insouciant (“I never looked back”), and the sorrowful gravity of a young wife suddenly made older by the loneliness and anxiety of separation. Because the young wife in Li Po’s poem is unpracticed in grief, she feels all the more sharply what are in fact all the traditional signs of her desertion and solitariness: the moss, the paired butterflies, and the autumn leaves falling in wind. Freshly to her, they hurt. To put the full stop after *me*, and then state “I grow older,” is a display of great control and objectivity on the part of Pound the translating poet. The young woman *feels* that she is growing older, aging by having to bear this hurt so early in life by an abrupt gap in the onflow of her short-lived happiness. The *ending* (represented by the full stop) of her happiness makes her realize that life’s bitterness and wantonness have started and await her in the future: “They hurt me. I grow older.” She is too demure to complain openly,

and Pound, through his tacit understanding, remains rather too discreet to hint at this, since she seems to have no reason to reproach her husband who as a merchant has to rely on his travel for their survival, so that his is not a tacit abandonment.

In Pound's version, this acute sense of time and change is again captured in the word "already" of the following line: "The paired butterflies are already yellow with August." The woman has begun to notice *for the first time* the change of the seasons and to recognize the painful images of their transience and mutability. And then she reminds herself that what makes leaves fall, early or not, is not grief or anxiety but wind ("The leaves fall early this autumn, *in wind*": "in wind" is poignantly isolated by a comma), so that the source of her present predicament is a natural cause for a natural phenomenon. Yet there is an even more somber underlying suggestion that grief itself may be "natural," part of the "natural" course of things, the autumn season coming earlier or later, inciting "natural" human emotion but beyond human control.

"The River Song" is made up of two poems by Li Po, the title of the second poem being versified and submerged in Pound's version.⁴⁰ The dramatic irony in the new context of Pound's version emerges from the persona's unique position and perspective, the ironic contrast between the two parts of the poem being generated from within the poem through the speaker's individualized response to a succession of images underscored by the very sequence of narration and reflection:

He returns by way of Sei rock, to hear the new nightingales,
For the gardens at Jo-run are full of new nightingales,
Their sound is mixed in *this flute*,
Their voice is in the twelve pipes *here*.

(CSP, 140)

Here, the word "this" in "this flute" echoes the first word in Pound's version: "This boat is of shato-wood . . . ," thus binding the whole poem together across the diverse parts and aspects of the two Chinese poems thus conflated. The specified reference to the dramatic-lyrical persona clinches the whole poem's meaning with an intensely dramatic disclosure. In Pound's new poem, if we take it that the poem's speaker is a poet, out carousing on a splendid and expensive boat and entertained with flute and pipes, remembering how he had lingered in the Emperor's garden "awaiting an order-to-write" ("And I *have moped* in the Emperor's garden . . . ," and then the memory changed into the past tense), we can indeed take the section starting "the eastern

wind” to be the poem that he writes or recalls, leading back into the garden where he awaited his order and the sound of those remembered nightingales “rhyming” with the flute and pipes on the boat *here* (“*This boat . . .*,” “the twelve pipes *here*”). If so, the conflation of the two poems would indeed be deliberate, because in Pound’s new poem the first contains as it were the setting for the writing of the second, and also contains its author. In this respect, the poem is more akin to what Pound defines as the “Noh” image rather than being merely Browningsque monologue. But in one respect, the “moping poet” of Pound’s version can be seen as a piece of Browningsque irony, in that the court-poet, waiting for the imperial nomination of a theme for composition, heard the nightingales’ singing as “aimless” because he was not free to respond to it or even to take notice of it. The exaggerated cacophony of these birds (“five-score”) is in sharp contrast with all the potentially sensitive and interesting images that were wasted simply because the poet was unassigned. But now, in the poem’s present tense, the poet is in full spate of delicate observation and description: “the fine birds sing to each other” and so on. In this light, Pound’s version is not a literal translation, but a rendering and reshaping of the original persona in a new dramatic-lyrical situation.

Thus Pound consciously or unconsciously superimposes Browningsque monologue and Poundian lyrical persona to form one poem. He emphasizes the *virtù* of the persona of the poem being translated. In the “Lament” poem, for example, Pound introduces near the end of his version “Ah, how shall you know the dreary sorrow at the North Gate,” where the “Ah” testifies to the extent to which Pound is able to enter into the original Chinese and emerge out of it with a transmuted sense of emotional paradox and irony, unifying the whole apparatus of the rhetorical voice in the traditional planctus cry of the lament poem.⁴¹

In *Cathay* Pound frequently invokes vocalized speakers, whether the personae themselves or the projected voices of the personae, whereas these voices are mostly absent or only latent in their Chinese originals. Pound ends “To-Em-Mei’s ‘The Unmoving Cloud’” with the birds’ speech:

The birds flutter to rest in my tree,
and I think I have heard them saying,
‘It is not that there are no other men
But we like this fellow the best,
But however we long to speak
He can not know of our sorrow.’

(CSP, 153)

I think I have heard them saying: this is purely Pound's own addition. Pound's version dramatizes the presence of the birds, not in order to displace the focus of personal elegiac meditation of T'ao Ch'ien's poem and thus to transform it into a different poem about the sorrow of the birds, but to find an analogy of sorrowful feeling in the birds themselves.⁴² Thus the emotion of the solitary who cannot speak his feelings directly because he has no human company is mimicked with a peculiar pathos by the birds who have plenty of company and many voices but who also cannot communicate their sorrow. The birds are given a kind of demotic speech ("this fellow") because they are also a common bunch: their fanciful grief thus imagined and imputed must of course be all in the mind and heart of the desolate human onlooker. But the solitary human figure has momentarily become all transparent—a kind of objective vehicle for embodying a mood—so that the reader does not really see him, but rather sees *through* his eyes and *beyond* him to a nature outside his window from which he has been alienated, so that the solitary human can only *think* that he hears the message of the birds.

The individualized perspective in *Cathay* is for the most part retrospective and is almost always tinged with an elegiac coloring. Yet this coloring is not a general, all-pervasive mood or atmosphere enveloping or devouring the individual speakers in the poems. It also often tends to leave the emotional stance of the translating poet (Pound in this case) somewhat uncommitted, in a kind of sympathetic neutrality, not by any implicit collusion expressing his own personal elegiac feeling. Thus the expression of this elegiac mood or feeling exists on three levels: that of the original Chinese poet being translated, that of Pound the translator, following Fenollosa's often neutral and uncommitted cribs, and finally the implied voice or stance of the resulting poem in English. These three levels are often not easily distinguishable; in a given poem they may exist simultaneously as a kind of superimposition of one upon the other.

Tennyson and other Victorian poets often, if not always, invoked a kind of elegiac collusion, whereas, to Pound, Joyce in his *Dubliners* was very close to the pathos and sense of suppressed unhappiness in his characters but remained fastidiously impartial in the matter of his own feelings. For Pound, Flaubert was the master to be set in contrast to the Tennysonian tradition (*LE*, 399–402). With the *Cathay* poems Pound comes closer to the Browningsesque dramatic monologue, in that they depend very much on the individual speakers and their narratives for dramatic development and psychological truth, rather

than solely on generalized moments of subjective lyricism. The speaker of each of the poems in *Cathay* is engaged in a particular dramatic monologue, dramatizing the narrated facts or events or imaginings in his or her individual life. However, the dramatic monologue of the *Cathay* poems differs greatly from the characteristic Browning monologue. Browning's speakers are often there to provide some striking perspective on certain unusual moral or emotional motives.⁴³ Yet it has to be emphasized that in English the Chinese poems are decidedly unusual, especially so to the English readers of the time when *Cathay* was first published. The *unusual* for Pound is often replaced by the *culturally* distant, unfamiliar and hard to retrieve as vital rather than merely antiquarian.⁴⁴

The *Cathay* poems as a whole do not provide some extraordinary moral perspective in which the reader would be invited to judge morally; rather, they almost invariably invite the reader to participate and sympathize in an ordinary yet highly individualized emotional or psychological perspective, except that the exotic and unfamiliar context—alien culture, lack of historical background or perspective as well as strange, unknown names—makes this for the Western reader “ordinary” only by an act of consciously maintained vicarious projection, not altogether different from, if not more extreme than, Browning's Renaissance Italy. Pound's narratives in *Cathay* do exert this leverage on the Western reader's imagination by presenting, as if in realistic description, actions and settings which a Western reader can only reconstruct by rather exotic envisagement. So the mood is muted and low-key, as if belonging to a familiar naturalism of emotional coding where hints and intimations are all that is needed. And yet all these narratives are to a significant degree alien and unfamiliar: they represent a remote and strange domesticity and moral ambiance which the Western reader cannot take in knowingly but must rather apprehend by acts of extended and parallel intuition. So that what looks so strange can yet seem so familiar, and it is perhaps the nuances of implied irony that give the rhythm of a poem its tension and laconic artfulness.

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NOTES

I am very grateful to J. H. Prynne for his helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article. Unless otherwise indicated, all italics in quotations are mine.

¹ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; reprint, New York, New Directions, 1970), 85.

- ² Ezra Pound, *Umbra* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1920), 128.
- ³ Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 135.
- ⁴ See Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 11; henceforth referred to as *LE*. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- ⁵ Herbert Giles, *Gems of Chinese Literature*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (London: B. Quarith, 1923), 2:122.
- ⁶ *The Table Talk and Omnia of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1917), 280–81; original emphases.
- ⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Poems*, ed. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Allott, 2d ed. (London: Longman, 1979), 655–56; original emphasis. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text, abbreviated *MA*.
- ⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3d ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 289.
- ⁹ Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems*, 2d ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 152; henceforth cited as *CSP*. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- ¹⁰ *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, ed. T. H. Vail Motter (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1943), 191–92.
- ¹¹ Kenner (note 3), 67–68.
- ¹² Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 102.
- ¹³ See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954–), volume 4, part 3 (1971), 112–16, on “the diffuse view-region principle” in Chinese landscape paintings. See also Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 74.
- ¹⁴ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 244; henceforth cited as *C*. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.
- ¹⁵ As Pound himself explicitly draws out the analogy between “Rihaku” and the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* in a note to *Cathay* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915), 4.
- ¹⁶ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 202.
- ¹⁷ See Pound’s comments on “South-Folk in Cold Country,” “The Bowmen of Shu” and “The Lament of the Frontier Guard” in his essay “Chinese Poetry,” *To-Day* 3 (1918): 57.
- ¹⁸ See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 51.
- ¹⁹ Ezra Pound, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris . . . I,” *New Age* 10 (1911): 107.
- ²⁰ See G. M. Gugelberger, *Ezra Pound’s Medievalism* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1978), 164–65.
- ²¹ See Stanley B. Greenfield, “The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of ‘Exile’ in Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” *Speculum* 30 (1955): 200–206.
- ²² See Alexander (note 12), 76–78.
- ²³ See Ezra Pound, *Pavannes and Divisions* (New York: Knopf, 1918), 121, on the importance of the speaker in the modern poem.
- ²⁴ See Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 210 and 206, on lyric as originally “an elegiac modulation.”
- ²⁵ David Lindley, *Lyric* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 11.
- ²⁶ John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 200–201. See also Fowler (note 24), 207, for a discussion of the nineteenth-century distinction between “elegy proper and elegiac ‘meditation about death and personal loss, transience, and unfortunate love.’”
- ²⁷ Amy Lowell, *Fir-Flower Tablets* (London: Constable, 1922), 124.
- ²⁸ Arthur Waley, *More Translations from the Chinese* (London: Allen, 1919), 37; first half of the poem quoted.
- ²⁹ Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters, 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (1950; reprint, New

York: New Directions, 1971), 178; original emphasis. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *L*.

³⁰ *Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound and Marcella Spann (New York: New Directions, 1964), 327.

³¹ See Thomas Hardy, "Preface" (1898) to *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), 6. See also Donald Davie's acutely perceptive study of Hardy's elegiac method, "Hardy's Virgilian Purples," *Agenda* 10 (1972): 138–56.

³² See Fowler (note 24), 207, on self-discovery as a central notion of elegy: "Elegy's meditation typically leads to recognition (*anagnorisis*) of feeling, to revelations and illuminations."

³³ See John Bayley, "Hardy's Poetical Metonymy," *Essays and Studies* n.s. 31 (1978): 115–30. See also A. F. Potts, *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), 323–24.

³⁴ For Pound's reading of such restraint, see his *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Peter Owen, 1952), 276.

³⁵ Pound, "Chinese Poetry" (note 17), 94.

³⁶ A. R. Orage, *The Art of Reading* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930), 143–44.

³⁷ Fenollosa had in fact written all his explanatory notes of the poem in the past tense throughout. Fenollosa's notes are reprinted in Sanehide Kodama, *American Poetry and Japanese Culture* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), 77–78 and 80–84.

³⁸ For a discussion of dramatic lyric and other modes, see Ralph W. Rader, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 131–51.

³⁹ For Fenollosa's notes, see Kodama (note 37), 83.

⁴⁰ See Wai-lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 148–53, for a discussion of Pound's conflation of the two poems.

⁴¹ See A. L. Lloyd, "Lament," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1980), 10:407–10, especially 407.

⁴² Kenner, *Pound Era* (note 16) rightly observes that "Pound has moved their sorrow into speech itself" (213).

⁴³ See Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (1957; London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), 85 and 93, and G. T. Wright, *The Poet in the Poem* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960), 132.

⁴⁴ For Tennyson's own taste for remotely exotic imagery, see W. D. Paden, *Tennyson in Egypt: A Study of the Imagery in his Earlier Work* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Publications, 1942).