

## Susan Schweik: On "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

Pound's *Cathay*: For the Most Part From the Chinese of Rihaku, From the Notes of the Late Ernest Fenollosa is, as Hugh Kenner has disclosed, "largely a war book."

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Speaking the war poem in Chinese, speaking it translated, was one way for Pound the noncombatant to speak the language of femininity in wartime without risk. As translator he could protect himself, exploring his civilian situation without exposing too much; as translator, he could also prevent the *Cathay* poems from in any way, however inadvertently, feeding the war machine. Even in late 1914, certainly in 1915, the gulf between England's "two nations" -- front and home -- was yawning, and soldiers' antiwar poetry was building that gap into its ideological and polemical structures. Choosing a third nation, the emblematically foreign China, Pound could write poems sympathetic to the values and experiences of those "left behind" without betraying the "frontier guard."

Read next to Owen's "The Letter" or "S. I. W.," Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" seems a discreet defense of the noncombatant, a validation of what she (and he) feels and knows. This poem about dedication to absence allowed Pound to affirm delicate feeling and an ethic of care and relation which extended beyond the brotherhood of combatants in wartime (qualities linked to the sensibilities of art); it allowed him to represent elegiac grief without gush, since the Chinese effect of the poem lies in large part in its tightly stressed reticence. Since the letter's strongest implication is of a deep, almost unspoken erotic and affectionate bond between the absent man and the waiting woman, a bond which seems to carry some kind of vital knowledge outside social convention, it seals the gap which a text like Owen's "The Letter" opens between the genders.

The exotic Chinese setting of "The River-Merchant's Wife" calls the modern English reader's attention to the patriarchal obedience structure which has shaped and constrained the wife's voice. The poem, like many Western texts, exploits the Western projection of sexual oppression onto the "Orient" -- but only in order to deny it. The wife's arranged marriage is, her letter "artlessly" reveals, a love match after all. One of the rhetorical effects of this move in the context of Great War discourse is to repudiate charges that women cheerfully wave "adieu" out of resentment, vicarious glee, or aggression; another is to locate women's renewing loyalty to men outside systems of sexual inculcation and familial arrangement, to recover a pure heterosexual alliance untainted by war's gendering systems. Kenner argues that the *Cathay* poems "paraphrase an elegiac war poetry nobody wrote"; but I would argue that in its defense of women and of remaining bonds between men and women "The River-Merchant's Wife" bears strong resemblance to any number of Great War poems written by women, including Farjeon's "Easter Monday" and Lowell's "Patterns," in which adieus are shown to falter and significant connections to persist.

The river-merchant's wife's position was, in fact, to some extent Pound's own. He was, after all, sending typescripts of some poems in *Cathay* as literal letters to the front, to Gaudier-Brzeska. (After the book came out in print his friend wrote from the Marne that he kept it at all

times in his pocket.) Pound's choice of poems to send to the trenches in manuscript is interesting, for he selected not examples like his "River-Merchant's Wife" which represent some version of his own situation, that of the one "left behind," but poems which explore the position of his correspondent, the ones which speak in the voice of combatants -- the sorrowful, obliquely outraged "Song of the Bowmen of Shu" and "Lament of the Frontier Guard." Gaudier-Brzeska very much appreciated these choices; "the poems," he wrote after receiving them, "depict our situation in a wonderful way." "Our situation" means primarily, I assume, the condition of trench warfare, the implied combatants' "we" excluding the civilian Pound even as the praise of Pound's poems, and that simple verb or realism "depict," embrace him into the corps.

In Cathay as a whole, then, speaking the war poem in Chinese, speaking it translated, was one way for Pound the noncombatant to speak without obvious falsehood or reprisal the one language of masculinity in wartime which seemed to matter: the language of the soldier. He could do so through Rihaku (Li Po) without making illegitimate or exploitative claims. Instead of the audacity of dramatic monologue, he offered the simple mediations of the interpreter. Depicting men's war "in a wonderful way," he confirmed his own poetic manhood. In Pound's "non-Chinese" Great War poems, that confirmation is even more pronounced; the delicately fetishized women and discreetly semieroticized male bonding in Cathay are replaced by gender in extremity. Parts IV and V of "Mauberley," with their critique of the "dulce et decorum" formulation, openly enlist in the ironic "war poem" tradition of the soldier poets. Any reader who doubts the heightened and declared masculinity of that tradition in Pound's hands should consult the famous line concerning the "old bitch gone in the teeth," one of the most overtly misogynist moments in twentieth-century war literature.

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