



Ezra Pound's orientalist poetry, natural rootedness, and Lepidoptera

J.E. Terblanche
Research FA 04
School of Languages (English)
Potchefstroom University for CHE
POTCHEFSTROOM
email: ntljet@puknet.puk.ac.za

R.F. Terblanche
School of Environmental Sciences
and Development
Potchefstroom University for CHE
POTCHEFSTROOM
email: drkrft@puknet.puk.ac.za

Abstract

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*In this article, we focus on the outward purpose (Umberto Eco) and natural rootedness of Ezra Pound's translation of Li Tai Po's "The River Merchant's Wife: a Letter." Natural rootedness – a sign actively conditioned by and into a dynamic ecosystem – is a central aspect of Taoist poetics and modernist orientalism (Gary Snyder). We follow the outward purpose of the sign, in further exploration of a zone of between-ness: **between** the opposites of culture and nature (William Howarth). In particular, we focus on the butterfly image in this poem. An interdisciplinary, ecosemiotical reading is made of this image within its poetic and natural context. We argue that this image is related to actual (ecological and evolutionary) butterfly colouration and behaviour in the (Chinese) ecosystem. Although no historical evidence of either Pound's or Li Po's interest in butterflies exists as far as could be determined, the middle ground between English and Chinese that Pound occupies (Eric Hayot) in this translation, could partially explain the interlevel correspondence between this image and actual butterfly behaviour. The article demonstrates that the image ties in well with an autumnal orpimentation or "enyellowment" of butterflies, as well as their sexual behaviour. It concludes that the significance of the sign is enhanced by its outward purpose towards and interpenetration with and within active nature, culminating in this central natural image in this important and creative poetic translation by Pound.*

1. Introduction

According to Umberto Eco in *The Limits of Interpretation*, human language, even in terms of “infinite semiosis”, does involve a purpose (Eco, 1990:38). Language is “connected with something which lies outside language” (Eco, 1990:38). This purpose “has to do with referents, with the external world”, and it “links the idea of interpretation with the idea of interpreting according to a given meaning” (Eco, 1990:38).¹ In this article, we focus on the outward purpose of Ezra Pound's modernist orientalist translation of Li Tai Po's “The River Merchant's Wife: a Letter.” Our argument concerns the outward purpose of the sign towards the ecosystem,² and it centres in the butterfly image in this poem.

Deep in the house of semiosis, there is “nothing outside the text” as Jacques Derrida's (1976:158) much-cited deconstructive maxim reads. Still, the house of semiosis, to stretch the metaphor (perhaps beyond itself), has windows and a door. It is possible to see outside and to take a walk outside. Taking such a walk, we wish to underscore that the sign gains in significance when it connects to the fresh air where butterflies are active.

We cannot prove that Pound or Li Po were interested in scientific knowledge of Lepidoptera,³ or even that they were observant of butterflies in general.⁴ Nonetheless, their butterfly image matches current knowledge of butterfly behaviour. To confirm our interdisciplinary reading of this image, we have to look elsewhere than such historical evidence. With a

1 Eco's argument (1990:38) traces the concept of “infinite semiosis”, originally employed by the linguist C.S. Peirce, to Jacques Derrida's use of it. The remarks cited here form part of Eco's critique of Derrida's misappropriation of this concept.

2 “Ecosystem” is defined in *The Green Studies Reader* as “the web of connections linking all the animals and plants in a particular environment” (Coupe, 2000:302). The active verb “linking” in this definition is of some importance, since dynamism (continuation) and interactivity are intrinsic to the biosphere.

3 Butterflies and moths are classified as insects (Class Insecta) with microscales on the surfaces of their wings (order Lepidoptera). Lepidopterists make scientific studies of Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths). The authors of this article have been involved in the study of Lepidoptera since infancy. One of the authors, R.F. Terblanche, has discovered several new taxa of butterflies in South Africa.

4 Pound took some interest in ornithology (the study of birds), like his fellow modernists T.S. Eliot and E.E. Cummings. For instance, in an exchange of letters with Cummings, Pound questioned Cummings' presentation of the American Blue Jay – a couple of American ornithological textbooks were referred to in this correspondence, and the behaviour and characteristics of this creature were revisited in this intriguing exchange between the poets (Ahearn, 1996:282-287).

view to somewhat indirect proof of Pound's and Li Po's knowledge of butterflies on the basis of their interests in nature in general, we can mention that Taoism, and modernist sinology, do involve an acute awareness of natural events. That is, the correspondence between the butterfly image in "The River Merchant's Wife" and the behaviour of butterflies, may not be a *mere* accident.

In *A Place in Space*, the deep ecological/ Buddhist/ Beat/ and "delayed" modernist⁵ poet Gary Snyder (1995:91) suggests that modernists such as Pound had a thirst for "naturalistic secular clarity", and that they found this in (their) Chinese. Natural rootedness is central to Taoist poetry, of the kind that Li Po wrote in the eighth century, and the kind that Pound translated in the early twentieth. With "natural rootedness" we mean a sign that is conditioned by natural experience (it gains proportion in accordance with its outward purpose), and that actively grounds itself in the actuality of natural continuation. Every aspect of such a sign is guided by, towards, and into the dynamic interrelations of the ecosystem. We further mean that sign, poet, reader, and natural (butterfly) events in the ecosystem, maintain a remarkable degree of reciprocity and interpenetration. The heightened "outward purpose" of such a sign thus can lead to sign-nature interactivity: it dynamically participates in dynamic nature. Snyder (1995:92) writes of

... how poetry might give human beings a window into the nonhuman. We know that the arts lend us eyes and ears that are other than human, pointing towards other biologies, other realms. From the fourth to the fourteenth centuries, the poetry of China reached far (but selectively) into the world of nature. Contemporary occidental poetry has been influenced by that aspect, too.

Modernist poetry explores a zone of between-ness, notably in its (often under-emphasized – see Qian, 1995:1) orientalist aspect. Here, perceived opposites such as culture and nature as well as East and West are involved in meaningful and dynamic cycles of cross-fluence. As the sinologist Eric Hayot (1999:524) suggests, Pound's modernist orientalist poetry writes itself into an East-West middle ground. Viewing Pound's slim volume *Cathay* (1916) as *either* a Chinese *or* an English product, often leads to less satisfactory critical results (Hayot, 1999:24). A view

5 Snyder can be viewed as a "delayed" modernist poet since he continues the modernist legacy of Pound's "English-as-Chinese" – as Robert Kern reveals in a detailed comparison of Pound and Snyder (1995:208).

that is neither squeamish about the (Saidian) textuality⁶ of Pound's sinological poetry – nor in denial of its capacity to carry across something of the essential (ecological) spirit of the original Chinese work – is more difficult and rewarding according to Hayot (1999:530).

As far as we can see, and given the implications of Snyder's remarks and Hayot's analysis, these poems and "The River Merchant's Wife" especially, concurrently write themselves into what the ecosemiotician (or "ecocritic") William Howarth (1999:520) describes as a significant, clarifying mixture of modern culture and ongoing nature, or the sign and the ecosystem. Against this broad background, the article examines a particular image – within its naturalistic, modernist/ Taoist context in "The River Merchant's Wife" – on the basis of particular (ecological and evolutionary) butterfly colouration and behaviour.

One aspect of Pound's Chinese translations always seems to be diminished in favour of another. Snyder, for instance, touches upon the resonance of a natural sensibility in modernist sinological poetry (of which Pound is a primary exponent) – but he does not state that modernist poetry is also underpinned by a modern (natural), scientific drive towards greater factuality and less sentimentality.⁷ Such a drive

6 Hayot offers a concise reassessment of Edward Said's paradigm-shifting *Orientalism* (1978). Hayot points out, with authors such as Qian (1995:1), that Said does not consider the so-called Far East in his work, that Pound's translations point to a view of the self-ness of the other, not in terms of superiority or exploitation (Hayot, 1999:528), and that T.S. Eliot's appraisal of *Cathay* is virtually and anachronistically Saidean (Hayot, 1999:515, 516, 529). One of Hayot's arguments is that we should not be squeamish about the textual nature of our interactions with Chinese poetry (Hayot, 1999:530). The middle ground that he envisages, entails among other things that modernist orientalism as found in Pound's work boils down to an *illuminating* (mis)representation (Hayot, 1999:530), or (mis)understanding. Our point in extension of this, is that such illumination also entails an interrelation between signs and the given behaviour of butterflies.

7 References to the poet-as-scientist are scattered throughout modernism. These include Pound's (1985:58) equations of poets with radio antennae, voltmeters, and steam gauges, Eliot's comparison of making poetry with a chemical process inside a chamber (Eliot, 1980:41), William Carlos Williams' analogy of Marianne Moore's mode of composition as scientific methods that belong to the laboratory (Homberger, 1976:158), Pound's insistence that poets should be found in the laboratory and not in the churchyard (Albright, 1997:8), and more. These references mark the scientific drive that underpinned the composition of modernist poetry: an attempt, and commitment, to come to terms with reality with greater clarity, through poetry. Contracted methods of composition in modernist poetry are examples of how this drive found its way into the very textures of modernism. Several poems by Wallace Stevens (1955:196, 471, 534) act as poetic manifestos of this drive towards greater clarity, objectivity, phenomenology, and poetic "science". For in-depth treatment of modernist poetic notions of essential semiotic "particles" and "waves" (or poememes), see

within modernism, “after” Taoism, underscores a likelihood that Pound’s butterfly image is also related to actual butterfly activity, in the spirit of a more scientific poetry. In his turn, Hayot focuses on the East-West middle ground, and his detailed analysis of *Cathay*’s critical reception over nearly a century of criticism leaves little room for him to discuss the culture-nature implications of his analysis. And Howarth writes of modern culture-nature between-ness without mentioning sinology or Pound, since his article has a different emphasis.

Our article will attempt to bring these sensibilities together, so to describe the natural rootedness of “The River Merchant’s Wife” and its butterfly image. We explore a zone of between-ness here, with a view to its East-West middle ground (Hayot), its active culture-nature between-ness (Howarth), its drive towards naturalistic secular clarity (Snyder), as well as the modernist objective of a more scientific (and less sentimental) poetry. We view the poem from an interdisciplinary, ecosemiotic angle, informed by our knowledge and experience of Lepidoptera. The body of the article involves a comparison of this butterfly image (within its context), and the behaviour and colouration of Lepidoptera in the (Chinese) ecosystem.

2. Chinese poetry and butterflies: the importance of Pound’s butterfly image

The intersection that we wish to highlight when it comes to this image, this poem, and these behaviours, encompasses a number of crucial semiotic, poetic, and ecological concerns, and we concisely touch on some of these as our argument develops. These include the issues of non-sentimentality and (poetic) factuality and intuition, as well as the need for the sign to sustain its (referential or other) connectivity and interactivity with and within nature, without necessarily projecting subjective human qualities onto natural otherness. They further include the sheer extent to which an image can be poetic, naturally rooted, and scientifically valid at once.

Of course, it could be argued that we are attempting to balance too much on too little: too many considerations on a single poetic image. However, consider the following:

- This image forms the culmination of nature imagery in “The River Merchant’s Wife” – as we shall make evident.

- “The River Merchant’s Wife” is estimated by a number of sinologists to be Pound’s best Chinese translation or creation (see Qian, 1995:76; Kern, 1996:197). The butterfly image studied here is therefore part of a salient example of Pound’s “English-as-Chinese” (in Kern’s terminology, 1996:208).
- “Small” as it is, the image furthermore forms part of a Chinese poetic tradition in which butterflies have played a prominent role. Examples include the foremost Taoist poet-teacher Chuang Tzu’s anecdote, dating to the fourth century BCE, in which the dreamer is not sure whether he dreams a butterfly or whether, upon awakening, the butterfly is dreaming him (Liu, 1975:60). This anecdote has attracted the affirmative attention of Western authors as diverse as the South African Buddhist poet Breyten Breytenbach (1971, non-paginated epigraph), and the meticulously scientific Russian-American novelist and Lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov (2000:472).

Li Po, in view of Chuang Tzu’s anecdote, wrote the following poem (approximately 1200 years after the recording of Chuang Tzu’s butterfly anecdote):

So-shu dreamed,
And having dreamed that he was a bird, a bee, and a butterfly,
He was uncertain why he should feel like anything else,

Hence his contentment (Qian, 1995:88).

In this brief poem, one sees the unique – and to Westerners frequently difficult to grasp – extent of identification between Taoist poet and natural other. It suggests nothing less than the notion that the poetic speaker becomes (is transformed along with or into) a butterfly, and wishes to be or say nothing further. Nothing, that is, that would be more certain. Consider that this means that the poem reaches beyond the split between subject (personal experience, emotion, intuition) and object (a solid or certain “hardening” of textual boundaries and one’s outlook, which usually goes along with maintaining intellectual distance from the outside realm). Naturally rooted language is guided by a radical identification with nature.

Pound’s butterfly image therefore belongs to an ancient butterfly legacy, which further corroborates our scrutiny of it. We believe that a sense of the outward purpose of the sign (towards nature), enhances its aesthetic values. If critics need to interpret “according to a given meaning” as Eco states (1990:38), then the sign as a whole – also when it is composed into poetry – gains in direction and proportion according to the given of natural existence. One of these values is the potential of greater natural

clarity and factuality, without distancing the sign to the extent of alienation from nature.

Pure semioticians, so to speak, may of course doubt the possibility of any “factuality” (outside language) whatsoever. The ecosemioticians Laurence Coupe and Jonathan Bate, in *The Green Studies Reader* (2000), argue that the view that nature is little or no more than a linguistic construct, is semiotically self-serving (Coupe, 2000:3), and that it may lead to the startling notion that there is (therefore) no nature (Bate, 2000:171). We wish to clarify our position in this respect: on the one hand, we do not suggest that poetry should be naturally factual. Gross distortion of nature, and the pretence that a text has no meaning besides itself, can render excellent literary (and therefore significant) results. On the other hand, we cannot deny the inherent value of natural existence and facts, and a poetry that resonates with these, may equally well gain in significance.

But what exactly is a natural fact? In which sense is such a fact non-sentimental? The study of Lepidoptera renders a couple of answers to these crucial questions. Numerous students of this fauna painstakingly incorporate Lepidopterist observation into the body of knowledge about Lepidoptera, over many years. Behaviour recorded in this manner repeats itself of its own accord. A new observer will observe the same habits – sometimes with interesting and illuminating variations or new discoveries – among the same species or families within the same habitats at the same time of the season. The layperson, upon reading factual Lepidopterist observations, will be at once startled by aspects that s/he has not noticed, and satisfied by descriptions of behavioural phenomena that s/he has only subliminally noticed.

For instance, it is well known to Lepidopterists that various butterfly families and species reveal changes in colouration that go along with changes in season. Whether described by humans or not, such behaviour continues, and has existed for millions of years before the arrival of humans (and their forms of language). That humans get to grips with these facts via various forms of semiosis including a mother tongue, may be as limiting as it can be revealing. That such facts and behaviours of the Lepidoptera are linguistic events in the first and total place, is doubtful.

At least since John Ruskin’s formulation in 1856 of the pathetic fallacy (Ruskin, 2000:485), poetry has been careful to avoid a too-easy projection of human linguistic and emotional qualities onto nature (Langbaum, 1970:104). Such avoidance is central to a determination of facts in Lepidopterist studies: the observer attempts to clear the mind

maximally of personal human interference, to see more clearly how butterflies behave on the basis of their behaviour, so to speak. Easy assumptions about butterflies' "feelings" or some such, are out of the equation.

In modernist poetry in general, as Robert Langbaum pointed out in his "The New Nature Poetry" (first published in 1959), the otherness of nature takes precedence over human linguistic and sentimental projection onto it (Langbaum, 1970:104). However, with modernist sinology, a modernist poetry of the self-ness of natural other-ness comes into its own. That is, not a totally objective, intellectual poetry – since objective distance can lead to a renewed interference of isolation and stasis (reification) – but a naturally rooted poetry that nonetheless remains strikingly non-sentimental, and intuitively correlates with actual natural movements. Pound's butterfly image is a good example of this.

3. Natural rootedness of "The River Merchant's Wife"

Before we turn to Lepidoptera behaviour, we consider the innate, Taoist sense of radical (rooted) earthiness in this poem:

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 (Pound, 1990:134).

Li Tai Po, original poet of this poem as has been stated, lived and composed during the Tang dynasty in the eighth century AD, a predominantly Taoist era of Chinese culture (Qian, 1995:71; Roberts, 1999: 64; Dawson, 1972:89). Li Po is considered one of the very best of China's (Taoist) poets. Taoist poetry, to the extent that we meaningfully (mis)understand its nature, could be to revitalize an extra-linguistic, original experience of one's active place in active nature, mediated through poetry. Such poetry employs utter economy and simplicity, as well as a minimum of (intellectualized) interference between reader, poet, and nature's overall motion (Liu, 1975:61). Taoists view signs themselves, along with intellection, as potential sources of such interference (Lao Tzu, 1987:27 – section 1; Welch, 1995:104). Paradoxically, Taoists are acutely aware of the differentiating (and hence interfering) impact of human rationalisms and human language⁸ – yet, through this very sign system, they seek to establish a spontaneous, intuitive, and radical (rooted) identity between the cultural human and the intrinsic dynamism of nature. To Taoists, nature is innate. The patterns and motions of human language can establish a link with patterns and motions of nature according to them (Liu, 1975:54). Language has to be arranged in an effective, economical manner: the interfering limitations of thought and language can be overcome precisely by being acutely aware of their limitations. We could say that Taoist poetry evokes nature by using language in two main ways: firstly, the fact that language falls short of nature is exploited, is pointed to, with the effect that that which lies outside language, nature, is subtly evoked through language. Secondly, a potent sense of humility or closeness to earth is invoked, by means of a maximally suggestive economy of language. In Taoist poetry, a

8 “Chuang Tzu, as soon as he has made (or perhaps quoted) the remark that ‘the myriad things and I are one’, goes on to say, ‘Since we are already one, how can I say a word about it? Yet since I have already called it ‘one’, how can I say I have not said a word? ‘One’ and ‘word’ make two; two and one make three. Going on from here, not even a skilled arithmetician could get to the end, let alone an ordinary man” (Liu, 1975:62). Awareness of the differentiating capacities of the sign did not prevent Taoists from expressing their sense of one-ness with nature.

contemplative distance between sign and nature allows a jump, or spark, between them in order to tie them into energetic, also frail, and earthy cycles of (human) nature. Open-endedness, and stripping the mind of standard linguistic interference such as opposites held in indefinite tension, allows a spontaneous sense of the return of nature. We would expect to find all or most of these aspects in "The River Merchant's Wife".

As in other poems, including Rainer Maria Rilke's "Herbst" (1906) and E.E. Cummings' "l(a)" (1958), "The River Merchant's Wife" also associates decline and fall with the stirrings of autumn. In this poem the leaves begin to fall early, in August: the month of summer's end in the northern hemisphere/ China. A mixture of high summer temperatures and the beginnings of autumn – such as a decline in the brightness of colours in nature – occurs at this time of year; and in some years, earlier than in others.

The poem tells the story of a couple growing up to get married. They have stayed in the same village all their lives. Then the husband leaves down the river, probably for mercenary purposes as it happened in China at that time (Qian, 1995:82). The young wife is left behind, uncertain of when (or if) her husband will return. As intimated by the "swirling eddies" such journeys were dangerous (Qian, 1995:82). That is why she goes to the lookout tower, in the (awed) hope of his return. A relationship that runs its expected course from youth to age is interrupted: the promise of completeness and fruitfulness – as intimated by the simple cyclical perfection of "blue plums" (mentioned early in the poem) – threatens to be indefinitely interrupted or suspended. For the poetic speaker, this disruption is connected to autumnal decline.

Consider that Romantic⁹ devices are not used. There is no pleading with autumn, no addressing it as if it were human, and no clumsy projection of feelings into natural events in "The River Merchant's Wife." In contrast, in his "Ode to the West Wind" (1819) Percy Bysshe Shelley's speaker addresses the wind as an "impetuous one" who should make the poet its lyre (Shelley, 1984:49). A possible exception to this in the case of "The River Merchant's Wife" is the noise of monkeys, described as "sorrowful".

9 The article employs the term "Romanticism" and its derivatives in the upper case and keeps terms such as "modernism", "sinology", and "orientalism" in the lower case. This marks a view that Romanticism could be seen as a major break with rational continuities, whereas modernism and sinology could be seen as broad fields of interest that are still developing. At present, scholarly works reveal little consistency in terms of the capitalisation/ decapitalisation of these terms.

Another possible exception is the presence of yellow butterflies, which *hurts* the poetic speaker; we will return to this recognition in this section of the article. Furthermore, objective observation or distance is not pushed to the point of deracination, or alienation from nature: instead, the poetic speaker's feelings tie in with natural changes such as leaves falling and butterflies that are already yellow.

The remainder of natural images is rendered without direct interjection of subjective human qualities into nature. Eddies swirl, leaves fall early, mosses grow too deep to be cleared away, and grass grows in the West garden. The eddies do not swirl "menacingly" (for instance), the leaves do not fall (say) "sadly": instead of the pathetic fallacy the poem relies on the suggestive powers of economical language to evoke an intuitive response from the reader. Recognition that the demise of the speaker's relationship and feelings coincides with natural autumnal decline is thus evoked, but not in the sense that earth itself somehow feels sad. In fact, the poem observes the *different* mosses. Why stress that they are different? A poem that is meant to merely use nature for the purpose of subjective human effects, would not as carefully mention this natural fact: that mosses are of different kinds (or species, in today's terms).

Of course this involves a purely semiotic choice of season. (Choosing the dead of winter as a natural backdrop would not have had the same effect, and we could speculate that such a choice would have been more ironic.) Poetically highlighting certain aspects of autumn further underscores the speaker's sense of decline. At the same time care is taken not to spoil awareness of nature with linguistic interference: directness and simplicity of statement, constraint of metaphors and the absence of similes, avoidance of explanatory comments – these lend delicate and, to our mind, convincing poise, proportion, and poignancy to the poem and the poetic speaker's feelings. A considerable number of critics and sinologists have in fact remarked upon the striking simplicity and straightforwardness of the poetic speaker's letter, and her humility and delicacy of restrained feeling (Kern, 1996:197; Qian, 1995:76). We extend this notion of the attractiveness of emotional proportions in this poem, to the view that this attractiveness resides in and is informed by the innate sense of natural humility that the poem suggests.

An immanent sense of human and natural co-existence is an important subliminal ground of the poem. It indicates that patterns of incline and decline are as much part of human relationships as of natural cycles: that human affairs and natural events "go together", so to speak. Against this background, the significance of the butterfly image, which is the culminating natural image in this poem, becomes clear. The butterflies are "already yellow with August". And their presence wounds the poetic

speaker. The entire poem is in the balance here: this is its emotional climax. And this moment is expressed in sharp, contracted sentences (Kern, 1996:199): "They hurt me. I grow older". There is no elaboration or explanation, just the given sharp sting of emotion itself. Moreover, these are a *pair* of butterflies: as if nature accents that which the poetic speaker can no longer enjoy (Kern, 1996:199); however, there is no sense of envy or thick irony here.

Nonetheless the sentence "[t]hey hurt me" with its striking contraction, also embodies the most metaphorical moment of the poem. The absence of her husband in contrast to the pair of butterflies, as well as the appearance that they are ageing (they are *already* yellow), are transferred to the speaker's loss in youth and the possibility of growing old without her partner: the possibility of male-female incompleteness in a lifetime. This implies that nature is at once in sympathy and out of sympathy with the speaker in this image: the pair of butterflies still fly as though nothing has happened, but they are also *already* yellow – the speaker's loss is co-eventual with colour changes and decline in nature. And this marks the beginning of her understanding that yin and yang, decline and incline, autumn/winter and spring/summer, are involved in a complex dance of which humans form a radical/ rooted and interactive part.

In accordance with the classical Chinese view (exemplified in the Tai Chi and the *I Ching*), this implies that neither incline itself nor decline itself is negative: these are extreme and opposite forces of the natural process but one is not "better" than the other (Capra, 1982:18; Palmer, 1998:19). Rather, discontinuation, or the disturbance of this balance and wholeness of struggling and changing opposites, is negative (Capra, 1982:19; Palmer, 1998:19). When one opposite or force predominates for too long (due to human interference), the non-good arises according to this natural view.

The poetic speaker's youthful understanding of these recognitions marks humility: closeness to *humus* and the cycles of earth. In a youthful sense, the poetic speaker in this poem does *understand*: she "stands under", so to speak, with feet on soil. As Qian writes, what ties the speaker's sensibilities together throughout the poem, is "a curve in her mental development over the years" (Qian, 1995:77); to our mind this curve is directly informed by natural interactivity. Throughout, and with various levels of intensity, this poem suggests that changes in the human realm are entwined with changes in nature. In further accordance with this Chinese view the poem suggests that in decline there is hope because decline, as it does in nature, holds within itself the seed of return and

revitalisation, emphasized with some excitement by the poetic speaker in the concluding stanza of “The River Merchant’s Wife”.

Given this innate sense of natural being that is built into the poem, how accurate is it in terms of natural events? How much purely sentimental and semiotic, human distortion occurs in it? And how much of nature-as-it-continues-to-be in (approximate) fact, does it manage to mediate? So far we have focused on the balance between distortion and constraint with a view to the innate sense of nature of the poem: semiotic devices such as metaphors are sparingly employed, but they are nevertheless employed. Semiotic choices are made, but the poet contains them in order to allow an intuitive, humble recognition of the natural interpenetration of a human state and natural being – that is, natural rootedness. To the reader with knowledge of Lepidoptera, it appears to be more than an accident that the butterfly image in this poem takes the exact shape that it does. In fact, it appears that the imagery reaches into butterfly behaviour itself.

Do butterflies (already) turn yellow with August as the poem implies? Do they change colour as seasons do? Posed another way: is yin, a deepening of colour, poetically imposed on butterflies in this poem? Is this a purely semiotic procedure that must be ascribed to the need for emotional exuberance or effect? Is this, then, merely a poetic/semiotic contrivance, an issue of signs that reflect only inward upon themselves and the human realm, and not outward, towards the actuality of ecological and evolutionary events?

4. Butterflies “already yellow with August” and the colouration/behaviour of Lepidoptera

Based on our veld experience of butterflies, common yellow butterflies that are most conspicuous and that are most frequently noticed by laypersons, belong to the family *Pieridae* which appear throughout the world (Smart, 1989:160) and mostly consist of medium-sized to large yellow and/or white butterflies. The habit of migration is “especially pronounced” among these butterflies (D’Abrera, 1982:120) – they are likely to be involved in wandering and visiting flowers to which they are attracted in gardens along the way. Also their flight is often of such a height that they are even more noticeable, over and above the fact that their colours, white and/or yellow, tend to attract attention, especially in clear sunlight. In contrast many *Lycaenidae* are smaller, duller, and keep close to the soil where they colonize (and remain within the boundaries of) small patches of land – and are therefore in many respects less noticeable. In short: their colouration, movements, and size make Pierids

visually prominent, unlike other butterfly groups that are sometimes known only to the Lepidopterist.

Our experience further indicates that the overall colour impression of butterflies from late summer/ early autumn onwards results in an increase of yellow and brown in nature. These variations in colouration are adaptive strategies for the purpose of more efficient crypsis¹⁰ within increasingly darker and generally more yellow, leaf-brown surroundings of late summer and autumn. Deepening of colour at this time is partly due to an increase in the abundance of Pierids. In the case of Pierids, moreover, this deepening of colour is *yellow* in particular (as will be explained in greater detail).

Does this also occur in China? The difficulty of obtaining knowledge about Chinese Lepidoptera has been largely alleviated by the publications of Bernard D'Abrera in 1982 and 1990. Chinese butterfly fauna is covered in two separate sets of these magnificently illustrated volumes that present the most comprehensive and recent treatment of oriental butterflies. Butterflies of the wetter and generally warmer part of China that falls to the South of the 33rd parallel, are covered in D'Abrera's *Butterflies of the Oriental Region* (1982). And the butterflies of the generally more arid and colder northern part of China – about which relatively little Lepidopterist knowledge has been available (D'Abrera, 1990:7) – are covered in *Butterflies of the Holarctic Region* (1990). (The 33rd parallel thus roughly divides China into a wetter/warmer, and a drier/colder half (Fairbank, 1994:5).)

D'Abrera stipulates that “there is great variation among the *Pieridae* according to the wet and dry seasons prevalent in the more tropical parts of the [oriental] region” (1990:120). Among numerous Pierid species, as Lepidopterists know well, this seasonal dimorphism goes along with natural orpimentation (“enyellowment” or an increase in yellow). In a number of cases this means that a yellowish dry season form replaces a whitish wet season form. Literally, individuals of a butterfly species are white in summer and individuals that hatch later, and in autumn, are yellow, in these quite common instances.

Given the rapid switching of generations among butterflies and the frequent proliferation of Pierids towards autumn, this process of orpimentation is eye-catching. Moreover, this process is anticipatory: in

10 *Crypsis* is preferred to the term *camouflage*. *Crypsis* refers to wing patterns, colours and behaviour of individuals that blend with the environment so that these individuals are inconspicuous/concealed to predators.

other words, individuals that hatch at the end of summer will “announce” the advent of autumn since they are already the yellow form. An adaptation for crypsis, orpimentation in part also helps to create the conditions for crypsis: an overall enyellowment, in which butterflies “contribute” as much as leaves, is the autumnal result.

The large and visible African Migrant, *Catopsilia florella*, of which huge swarms on occasion fly across the landscape after good rains (Pennington, 1967:124), occurs not only in South Africa but also in China (D’Abrera, 1990:170). The effect is visually dramatic as literally thousands of conspicuous wings head in the same direction, across fields or roads.

The yellow form of the female *C. florella* that replaces its whitish form is specifically indicated for the moister southern parts of China (D’Abrera, 1990:170). The Common Emigrant, *Catopsilia pomona*, also occurs in southern China and the many forms of this species are highlighted by seasonal variations that include yellow and yellow-to-orange forms (D’Abrera, 1990:173; Haribal, 1992:87). This transition from light to yellow forms is so distinct that they were once treated as separate species in India (Haribal, 1992:87). Additional Pierid genera are involved in this process of orpimentation in southern China, such as *Appias* (D’Abrera, 1990:156). From late summer into autumn, then, an impression of “enyellowment” because of an increase in Pierids frequently occurs on earth and in China, and this effect can be visually astonishing.

As D’Abrera (1982:96) further mentions the word “butterfly” possibly marks the buttery colour of attention-grabbing yellow Pierids, viewed as *the* butterflies since early days, such as *Genopteryx*, a close relative of *Catopsilia*, which occurs throughout the Holarctic region from North America to Europe and Asia (including northern China). In short, the colour yellow and the process of orpimentation are closely associated with butterflies that are conspicuous to the lay eye. That the butterflies of “The River Merchant’s Wife” turn yellow during late summer/ early autumn is in all likelihood not a purely semiotic whim: it is related to actual butterfly behaviour. This notion is further confirmed by the fact that colouration in butterflies is associated with their male-female behaviour.

C. pomona males tend to chase the female (Haribal, 1992:87) and therefore often fly in pairs as the yellow butterflies in “The River Merchant’s Wife” are seen to do by the poetic speaker. Charles Darwin predicted it, and it was recently empirically proven, that colouration in Pierids has a direct bearing on their sexual behaviour (Rutowski, 1998: 46, 48). Towards the end of summer many Pierids, due to their wandering and twirling around one another, carry duller wings since the pigmented scales on their wings have worn off. These duller individuals

are replaced with freshly coloured individuals, often yellowish ones as we have noted. Females prefer these freshly coloured males to dull ones (Rutowski, 1998:48); here we have an instance where otherly behaviour as far removed from our own as that of butterflies, is familiar.

Orpimentation, ageing, and mating, are inextricably entwined with the evolutionary and ecological behaviour of butterflies. An intuition and/ or observation as depicted in "The River Merchant's Wife" – that aging, male-female relations, and colour alterations in butterflies are significantly entwined on earth and in language – is shown to be sound in terms of actual natural events. Our brief Lepidopterist exploration reveals that poetic (Taoist) intuition of interrelatedness, of butterflies that also change colours along with seasons and leaves, as well as the intuition that this ties in with male-female pairs in nature, does not merely approach butterfly ethology (behaviour), but also traces it with great precision. However subconsciously and/ or poetically so, humans are aware of the environment and of colour changes in the environment, and this awareness could of course be incorporated in poetry on a conscious or subliminal basis.

Neither of the following notions as revealed by "The River Merchant's Wife" is incompatible with actual butterfly behaviour: butterflies that are conspicuous to the layperson 1) often wander into gardens, 2) often twirl around one another in pairs before they continue their migration, 3) are often yellow/white in colour, 4) often announce and anticipate the deepening of colour, especially in terms of orpimentation, from the eighth month (August) onwards (in the northern hemisphere), and 5) behave sexually in accordance with the process of "aging" and orpimentation. The poetic correctness of this image highlights, from the Lepidopterist reader's perspective, the extent and validity of Taoist/ oriental modernist awareness of nature, as well as the validity of the notion that signs with an outward purpose manage to get that which lies, strictly speaking, outside human language (butterfly behaviour), into it. Simultaneously, human language is taken outside where it connects with nature. Such cross-stitching of the supposed opposites of culture and nature appears to characterize modernist orientalism on the whole. Possibly, this is central to what could be termed Hayot's and Howarth's interactive middle route, or zone of between-ness (where opposites merge meaningfully). Future research should continue to determine these potentials.

5. Conclusion

We now return to Eco (1990:38), who writes of a "given context" against which an interpretation can be made. An implication of this remark is that the sign ultimately returns to its limit, and hence to the outside realm of

nature. The following question remains: is an interlevel link between the realm of semiosis and the realm of the ecosystem possible? Rephrased: can signs be produced in such a way that they connect to the way in which nature continues? That is, can the sign be naturally rooted without (sentimental) human projection with the pathetic fallacy? Conversely: can an objective clarity about nature be maintained in semiotic events such as poetry, without the inevitable occurrence of an irrevocable interference, barrier, or distance between poetic speaker, reader, and the dynamics of nature? After all, the sign as object, and a sign written with great intellectual distance, will at some point lose contact with the self-evident dynamism of nature and close itself off from outside realms.

As we have demonstrated, Pound's butterfly image continues to steer between the oppositional extremes suggested by these questions. In the process, the sign reaches its self-referential limit and opens up into the natural realm. The butterflies are self (they hurt) and other (they continue to fly and turn yellow in autumn), at once. Or: they are simultaneously subjective (personal) and objective (on their own and slightly distant). And at the moment that the poem reaches its emotional crisis – when the butterflies hurt the poetic speaker – it also manages a conscious or subliminal clarity of natural events. In short: the more the poem penetrates dynamic (changing) humanity, the more it penetrates the dynamic (changing) ecosystem.

It should be said that such integrity of human culture and nature should remain intact, for a final dissociation of the two realms, one of a static and completely self-referential realm of human signs, and the other of a self-evident biological continuation, would entail nothing less than the end of humanity and significance. The sign can displace nature, of course, but it can also orient one within nature as our Lepidopterist reading of Pound's image makes clear.

An intriguing turn of events, as pointed out by Robert Kern (1996:7), occurs in a (dis)seminal deconstructive book, Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1976). Here he states that Pound's Chinese poetry, based on Ernest Fenollosa's notes, needs to be "given all its historical significance" (Derrida, 1976:92). This ties in with Derrida's (1976:90) argument that Chinese and Japanese ideogramatics are a "powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism".

We assume that Derrida was aware of Pound's statement in his *ABC of Reading* (first published in 1934), that the "Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound" (Pound, 1987:21), thus implying (in retrospect) that Chinese is not phonocentric and hence not logocentric. In further confirmation of our exploration of the natural aspects of

Pound's orientalist poetics, Pound (1987:22) also specifically relates the ideogram to biology.

It appears that even in Derrida's thought, whether correctly so or not, the vast, infinite labyrinth of Western metaphysics (which Derrida so frequently assumes and addresses), does offer at least one escape route: Chinese, as written by Pound. To our mind it is an escape into the fresh air of the ecosystem where butterflies skilfully survive and float on their aesthetic wings. We would add that this escape is also an inscape, as much as the outward movement of the sign is also an inward movement. If post-structuralism can be viewed as a dissemination, a scattering of seeds, the re-opening-up of creative chaos, it does suppose the growth of those scattered seeds and traces of decayed post-structuralist semiotic fragments into the relative and active living order of (say) semiotic trees – not unlike the incorporation of chaotic organic materials into the relative and active living order of human physical being and culture.

Our personal history designates us radically to doubt a conclusion that human nature and culture could be the same without the very existence of butterflies. In slight paraphrase of William Wordsworth's words, they remain the historians of our infancy (1986:244), and more. Our humanity would not be the same in the absence of butterflies and their otherly behaviours. Therefore, if language were no more than an insurmountable barrier or infinite vacuum of differential postponement between butterfly-selves and ourselves, we would have to look for another system of communication. As Pound's translation proves, this is not necessary. We conclude: the notion that the sign needs fresh air as much as humans do, and that its meaning can be enhanced by its outward purpose towards and interpenetration with nature, needs to be further investigated in future research on the function and character of human language. Our article hopes to contribute in this direction.

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Key concepts:

Ezra Pound: modernist orientalist poetry
Lepidoptera: colouration and behaviour
natural rootedness

Kernbegrippe:

Ezra Pound: modernistiese oriëntalistiese poësie
gewortelheid in die natuur
Lepidoptera: kleure en gedragswyse