

Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

Portrait d'une Femme (1926)

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.
Great minds have sought you—lacking someone else.
You have been second always. Tragical?
No. You preferred it to the usual thing:
One dull man, dulling and uxorious,
One average mind—with one thought less, each year.
Oh, you are patient. I have seen you sit
Hours, where something might have floated up.
And now you pay one. Yes, you richly pay.
You are a person of some interest, one comes to you
And takes strange gain away:
Trophies fished up; some curious suggestion;
Fact that leads nowhere; and a tale for two,
Pregnant with mandrakes, or with something else
That might prove useful and yet never proves,
That never fits a corner or shows use,
Or finds its hour upon the loom of days:
The tarnished, gaudy, wonderful old work;
Idols, and ambergris and rare inlays.
These are your riches, your great store; and yet
For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
In the slow float of differing light and deep,
No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
Nothing that's quite your own.
Yet this is you.

ANALYSIS

“In fact the Sargasso Sea is a large area of relatively still water in the North Atlantic, bounded by rotating currents, notable for its great abundance of floating seaweed. In legend it is a place where ships have become hopelessly entangled in seaweed, a place where the ocean floor is littered with the half-buried hulks of ancient caravels, Spanish galleons, pirate ships, and men-of-war, a place which, originating nothing, has collected treasures from all over the earth and from all its centuries.

As such, it is the perfect image for the mind of the woman Pound is describing. A person of no original thought but of wonderfully quick and retentive memory, a good talker and listener and a charming companion, she has collected treasures from the minds of all the great men who have sought her out—not for a wife, but for a companion or a mistress. Living, as it were, no life strictly her own, having no husband and no children, she has yet participated richly in the lives of others, and now her mind is full of entertaining old gossip, ‘oddments of all things.’ She has thus become an even more entertaining companion, and her conversation repays richly those who seek her out, though she is ‘second always’—has never been the emotional center of any one man’s life. Her knowledge, furthermore, serves no practical use, but only makes her delightful company.

One dominating metaphor makes the poem. Weaving skillfully back and forth between literal statement and its figurative counterpart, Pound paints beautifully the strange wonder of the underwater world with its shifting half-lights and collected treasures, and gives at the same time an exact accounting of the life and mind of this woman in whom nothing, as Shakespeare puts it, 'But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.'

'You are a person of some interest,' Pound says to the woman; 'one comes to you / And takes strange gain away.' The use of the word *interest* both in its ordinary and in its financial meanings illustrates Pound's unerring sense of diction. His words fit their context exactly, usually in more than one way. Here, the financial meaning fits into a series of other words suggesting money—*fee, price, pay, gain, riches*. The other meaning pertains to the attractions of her mind."

Laurence Perrine
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