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“Can the One Word ‘Sorrow’ Suffice?”:  
An Analysis of Grief and Yearning in Li Qingzhao’s  
“Sorrow of Separation” and “Autumn Sorrow”

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“Can the One Word ‘Sorrow’ Suffice?”:  
An Analysis of Grief and Yearning in Li Qingzhao’s  
“Sorrow of Separation” and “Autumn Sorrow”

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In two of Li Qingzhao’s signature *ci* poems, “Sorrow of Separation” (《一剪梅·红藕香残玉簟秋》) and “Autumn Sorrow” (《声声慢·寻寻觅觅》), grief and yearning are explored through carefully crafted imagery of the external world, personal questions about loneliness, and ruminations about the effects of loss on the body and mind.

While “Sorrow of Separation” was composed in the Northern Song period in response to Li’s husband’s work-related departures shortly after their marriage, and “Autumn Sorrow” was written following his death in the Southern Song period, both poems are suffused with the same undertones of despair, offering similar lamentations about the merciless present and voicing yearnings for an alternative reality. These structural and tonal similarities reflect the ways in which both of these situations — her husband’s departure and his subsequent sudden death — have left her desolate and bereft. Structurally, Li’s progression through grief and loss commences with her observation of the scenic world, transitions to a comparison between the external environment and her inner emotions, and culminates in a fully interior exploration of loneliness, characterized by rhetorical questions and realizations about her melancholy and grief. Through the use of sensory imagery, Li delineates an external world that mirrors and continues to reinforce her sorrow, infusing the poems with a tone of pathos. Ultimately, Li presents loss and grief that are merciless and unrelenting, demonstrating not only her unending misery, but also the way in which the physical environment fails to empathize with her and in fact only amplifies her sorrow.

The physical environment that Li describes contextualizes her loneliness and grief, serving as

an entryway to her further ruminations. Specifically, Li employs floral imagery, references to seasonality, and descriptions of birds to authenticate her sense of loss. In these poems, Li's floral imagery centers primarily on flowers that are perishing, articulating her sorrowful experience. In "Sorrow of Separation," Li describes how "the lotus has wilted, only a faint perfume remains" ("红藕香残") and how plum blossom "flowers fall and drift away" ("花自飘零"). The verbs "wilt," "fall," and "drift" signal changing seasons, a process that necessitates decay and the abandonment of a fruitful present. With the image of the wilting lotus (荷花), Li reveals the deep extent to which her personal growth is lost: in Buddhist tradition, the lotus symbolizes the holy seat of Buddha, a position of spiritual perfection and supremacy. Because the lotus grows out of the mud yet is not soiled, Li's reference to the lotus evinces a quality of pure, unadulterated virtue. Hence, when she laments the lotus's wilting, she conveys her inability to find spiritual growth and contentment amidst the sordid reality of being separated from her loved one. Moreover, in Li's description of the plum blossoms (梅花), the focus on their falling and drifting mirrors the tumult of change in her life, evident in the abrupt transition from being newly married to being physically apart and constantly awaiting her husband's return. As plum blossoms endure and continue to bloom throughout the winter, they are ciphers for the strength and will of human character. Yet Li's emphasis on their falling and drifting points to her own inability to endure her searing loss or find a way through her pain, amplifying her sense of hopelessness. The plum blossoms are the poem's overarching floral image, as evidenced by the poem's fixed melody (曲牌), titled "A Sprig of Plum Blossoms" (《一剪梅》); the title of this fixed melody establishes the poem's dark undertow of fragility and loss. Additionally, in "Autumn Sorrow," Li describes "golden chrysanthemums in drifts" ("满地黄花堆积"). Traditionally, chrysanthemums (菊花) represent nobility and longevity, and here Li's description of the chrysanthemums in a drifting state magnifies the state of flux she finds herself in after her husband's death. Because her husband's life was abruptly cut short on a political assignment, she finds herself unable to identify with the sense of longevity that the chrysanthemums intimate. The fact that her husband died for a purportedly noble, patriotic political cause also endows the chrysanthemum imagery with a note of mockery, because such an association fails to provide a source of commiseration for her. Thus, the chrysanthemums in the external environment fail to alleviate Li's misery, and in fact only haunt her with their irreconcilability to her present circumstances.

Furthermore, floral imagery is associated with Li's solitude. In “Sorrow of Separation,” Li writes that she will “step on my orchid skiff alone” (“独上兰舟”). This description of aloneness contrasts with the symbolic significance of the orchid (兰花) as an emblem of unity and love, most often through the lifelong commitment of marriage. Here, Li juxtaposes her solitary sailing with the floral symbol of unity, underscoring the jarring nature of her longing. Floral imagery thus serves to sculpt an experience of loss that is built on a confluence of emotions — namely, disorientation from abrupt change, loss of spiritual hope, and loneliness.

In addition to floral imagery, Li makes specific references to seasonal changes, the time of day, and bird imagery to illustrate her grief and yearning. Pinpointing seasonal changes involving summer's segue into autumn, Li observes “on the bamboo mat there's a touch of autumn chill” (“玉簟秋”) in “Sorrow of Separation,” and laments the “coldness and desolation” and “sense of chill” (“冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚”、“乍暖还寒”) in “Autumn Sorrow.” References to autumn highlight the significance of autumn as a season of decline and decay; here, Li associates autumn with the “chill” and “coldness” antithetical to the warmth of summer. Li's melding of sensory imagery demonstrates her acute awareness of the pensiveness that autumn instills; the cold reminds her of the impermanence of summer and warmth, and the broader impermanence of her own vitality. Specifically, in “Autumn Sorrow,” she remarks that “as soon as one feels a bit of warmth / A sense of chill returns” (“乍暖还寒”), and the external environment is a direct reflection of her inner state of “coldness and desolation” (“冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚”), preceding her deep retreat into sadness. Furthermore, Li's references to the time of day — namely, sunset and night — serve to elucidate her sorrow. She cries: “How the day drags before the dusk descends!” (“怎生得黑”) and talks about the “deepening twilight” (“到黄昏”) in “Autumn Sorrow,” as well as mentions that “the moon will be flooding the West Chamber” (“月满西楼”) in “Sorrow of Separation.” Li's focus on the dusk and night heightens her anticipation of the day's being over; hours “drag” in a manner that is merciless to her, and she is unable to find a sense of peace throughout the day. Her mention of the “deepening twilight” also intimates her insomnia and inability to find physical rest in the night, accentuating the extent to which her overwhelming loss has taken its toll on her emotionally and physically.

Moreover, Li's imagery of wild geese in both poems evokes the severed relationship between two people. Migrating geese flying overhead symbolize the communication and exchanges between

two people, usually a married couple, who remain physically separated over long distances. In “Sorrow of Separation,” Li laments that “when the wild geese return / The moon will be flooding the West Chamber” (“雁子回时，月满西楼”). As this poem is about physical separation, Li hopes for the time the “wild geese return” and the moon floods the West Chamber, both images fusing to provide a scene of anticipated union and restoration. Li’s realization of the wild geese in “Autumn Sorrow” has a less hopeful undercurrent: she observes that “Wild geese wing past at this of all hours, / And it suddenly dawns on me / That I’ve met them before” (“雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识”). The phrase “wing past at this of all hours” shows the incongruity of the wild geese’s timing of arrival. As Li comes to terms with her husband’s passing, the geese’s arrival cruelly reminds her that she will never communicate with her husband again, augmenting her inability to reconcile the palpable presence of the geese with the equally stark yet permanent absence of her husband. Li realizes that she has met the geese before, implying that this is not the first time Li has been visited by such an unsparing reinforcer of her status as a widow completely alone. With Li’s mention of the geese’s revisitation, she insinuates not only that she is always ensconced in inappropriate, derisive reminders of how she and her husband are sundered by death, but also that such reminders are only natural earmarks of the grieving process. Grief and yearning are thus embodied in Li’s description of seasons, time of day, and wild geese, intensifying her inability to separate the external environment from her grieving emotional state.

After describing the external environment, Li plunges into her meditations on loneliness and grief by asking rhetorical questions surrounding the external environment, in the hope that she will have her questions answered and find closure. In “Autumn Sorrow,” Li admits that the seeking and searching she has hitherto done is futile in the following rhetorical question: “What comes of it but / Coldness and desolation, / A world of dreariness and misery” (“寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚”). Here, Wang’s English translation does not add a question mark to Li’s question, conveying a tone of lifelessness and prostration symptomatic of Li’s desire to give up her searching. In the same poem, she subsequently asks “What avail two or three cups of tasteless wine / Against a violent evening wind?” (“三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他晓来风急？”). Again, the outer environment has a parallel with Li’s inner state; the personification within her phrase “violent evening wind” echoes Li’s overriding sentiment that the wind is cruel, tormenting, and insufferable, just as her grief is. Thus, enmeshed in

agony, Li perceives the wine before her as “tasteless” and unable to assuage her suffering. Upon seeing the golden chrysanthemums outside, Li inquires: “How I’d have loved to pick them, / But now, for whom?” (“憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？”). Li’s lack of desire to pick golden chrysanthemums contrasts with the symbolic significance of the chrysanthemums as being noble and excellent; on the contrary, she feels depleted and lethargic, and so she leaves them “faded, neglected” (“憔悴损”), an action that is consistent with her feeling of desolation. In “Sorrow of Separation,” Li asks: “Who is sending me the letter of brocade / From beyond the clouds?” (“云中谁寄锦书来？”) as she stares up at the sky when sailing on her skiff. This question anticipates an answer that leads back to her husband, with whom she is physically separated, and nullifies her attempt to dampen her yearning for him by sailing on her skiff. Finally, in “Autumn Sorrow,” Li asks a culminating rhetorical question that captures her complete sorrow: “To convey all the melancholy feelings / Born of these scenes / Can the one word “sorrow” suffice?” (“这次第，怎一个愁字了得!"). This rhetorical question frames the underlying sentiment of Li’s poem: that her grief and loss cannot be defined or communicated, and that the external world both evokes grief and calcifies it in her mind. The verb “born” moreover injects an implication in this poem: that the environment itself continues to breed more harrowing associations with melancholy and tragedy. Thus, the spiritual dreariness and coldness Li experiences is unforgiving and unrelenting, and it cannot be severed from the environment. Answers to Li’s rhetorical questions are obvious, and they all anticipate an answer that is laden with hopelessness. These questions are a form of personal denial, suggestive of Li’s inability to come to terms with the extent of her loneliness.

Li’s deeper meditations on her loneliness are accompanied by an extensive use of parallelisms. In “Sorrow of Separation,” synonymous parallelism is used when Li writes “Flowers fall and drift away, / Water glides on, / After their nature” (“花自飘零水自流”). The motion of the flowers and waters is inevitable; it is “their nature” to enter periods of transition because of seasonal changes in the broader world. The rhythm of this transition in the natural world not only underscores the inevitability of temporality, but diverges with Li’s present inertia, as she remains stationary in one region while her husband is in another. By highlighting her inertia, Li accents the distance between herself and her husband as they yearn for each other in the following antithetical parallelism: “Our yearning is the sort / Both sides far apart endure” (“一种相思，两处闲愁”). There is one yearning, but it is felt between both husband and wife across two different lands. In this phrase, Li projects her own

longings, but also acknowledges that she is not alone in experiencing this longing, which imbues the poem with a tone of affection. Finally, synthetic parallelism is used to emphasize the toll her sorrow has taken on her physical body; Li closes the poem with: “A melancholy feeling there’s no resisting. / As soon as it leaves the eyebrows / It surges up in the breast” (“此情无计可消除，才下眉头，却上心头”). Strikingly, there is a motional parallelism with “leaves” and “surges,” as well as a parallelism of corporeal imagery with “eyebrows” and “breast.” These parallelisms express how Li’s sadness does not go away; as soon as it leaves one body part, it infiltrates another despite Li’s desperation to resist it. The verb “surges” also communicates the velocity with which melancholy re-enters Li’s physical self; this immediacy underscores the untenable nature of her loss. In Li’s poem, these verbs also convey a sense of opposite directionality, with “leaves” and “surges” signaling downward and upward movement, respectively. This parallelism communicates a pulsating effect, extending the aforementioned feeling of disorientation associated with her grief. With her emotions following a path so disorderly, Li elucidates her unsteady loss of bearing. Unlike “Sorrow of Separation,” “Autumn Sorrow” is bereft of corporeal imagery, and parallelisms are formed in terms of diction. The lack of corporeal imagery suggests that, after her husband’s death, Li feels disembodied and can only speak about the external world or abstract experiences of pain. The sense of disembodiment is highlighted in the poem’s opening lines “Seeking, searching. / Searching, seeking” (“寻寻觅觅”) in which the repetition of the verbs “searching” and “seeking” lend a unique cadence to the poem but also underline Li’s search for closure, which starts with her observations of the natural world and culminates with her confession that words cannot fully convey her sorrow.

In conclusion, both “Sorrow of Separation” and “Autumn Sorrow” paint a bleak portrait of life in the absence of a loved one, emphasizing the commonalities of two types of loss: one due to physical separation, and one due to death. Li conveys her emotions of yearning and bereavement using imagery, rhetorical questions, and parallelisms, illustrating how these emotions are inextricable from the external world, all-consuming, and giving rise to unanswerable questions about future closure. She also authenticates the idea that what makes grieving so agonizing is its associated experiences of loneliness, irretrievable longing, and constant reminders of an alternate reality that is forever unreachable. Overwhelming grief hence can never be separated from the natural environment, because whether the external world parallels or differs from one’s grief, it only serves to reinforce a



sense of loss and make one feel untethered. Ultimately, Li sees no source of consolation for her agonizing sorrow in the face of merciless absences and, more broadly, the unforgiving political conditions that led to these absences. Thus, because every sight Li discerns around her reminds her of her own despair, the word “sorrow” is fitting, but it certainly does not suffice in unearthing and conveying the nuanced layers of her bottomless pain.

WORK CITED

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