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Ezra Pound, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and philology

Michael Kindellan

[This essay argues that Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's unconventional approach to the Chinese language and to the history of sculpture both shaped and supported Pound's anti-philological tendencies in the 1910s; it suggests Gaudier's example resonated throughout Pound's career, most discernibly after a long interval in idiosyncratic interpretations of sinographs incorporated into the late *Cantos*, his most ethically-oriented work. It concludes by questioning the contradiction between the creative etymologising of foreign words and Pound's life-long insistence that linguistic accuracy safeguards the ethical norms of a just society.]

Towards the end of 1913, the poet, independent scholar, translator and aspiring art critic Ezra Pound acquired from Ernest Fenollosa's newly-widowed wife Mary the late art historian and English professor's unpublished scholarly papers. These notes consisted largely, after Pound's editorial interventions, of two books: *Noh, or Accomplishment: a Study of the Classical Stage of Japan* (1916) and *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919). Though trained in art history, Fenollosa's professional success owes at least as much to amateur enthusiasm as to professional expertise. In particular his comments on the pictographic origins of Chinese writing betray a definite philological naïveté,¹ one that bares the conspicuous hallmarks of a deep affection for Emerson's essays—especially the notion that 'language is fossil poetry' as espoused in 'The Poet'²—as well as a maverick

¹ Most famously George A. Kennedy called the essay a 'mass of confusion' in 'Fenollosa, Pound and the Chinese Character', *Yale Literary Magazine* 126.5 (Dec. 1958): 24-36. 25. See also: James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962) 5-16; Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: UCP, 1971) 228; Hwa Yol Jung, 'Misreading the Ideogram', *Paideuma* 13.2 (fall 1984): 210-27; Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 109; and Victor Li, 'Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language', *boundary 2* 15.1/2 (Autumn 1986-Winter 1987): 187-210. 194. For recent reappraisals of common censures of Fenollosa's ideas that shift blame onto Pound's editorial work, see: Haun Saussy, 'Fenollosa Compounded: A Discrimination' in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham UP, 2008) 1-40; and Jonathan Stalling, *The Poetics of Emptiness: Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (New York: Fordham UP, 2010) 33-58.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet' [1844], *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 259-84. 271.

scholarly sensibility that led him to refuse to believe arguments that apparently could be contradicted by evidence he thought he saw before his very eyes. A passage such as the one following, insisting upon the idea that in Chinese script ‘etymology is constantly visible’³ typifies Fenollosa’s exceptional approach:

It is true that the pictorial clue of many Chinese ideographs can not now be traced, and even Chinese lexicographers admit that combinations frequently contribute only a phonetic value. But I find it incredible that any such minute subdivision of the idea could ever have existed alone as abstract sound without the concrete character (30).⁴

To this passage, in his function as editor, Pound appended a rare footnote. He wrote:

He [Gaudier-Brzeska] was able to read Chinese radicals and many compound signs almost at pleasure. He was used to considering all life and nature in terms of planes and of bounding lines. Nevertheless he had spent only a fortnight in the museum studying the Chinese characters. He was amazed at the stupidity of lexicographers who could not, for all their learning discern the pictorial values which were to him perfectly obvious and apparent (30-1).⁵

³ Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* [1919], ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1983) 25.

⁴ This quotation bears comparison with Ferdinand de Saussure, with whom Fenollosa seems to disagree in advance: ‘A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and name, but between a concept and a sound pattern’ in *Course in General Linguistics* [1916], ed. Charles Ball et alia, Trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 2004) 66.

⁵ For an earlier, slightly different account, see: Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* [1916; rev. ed. 1970] (New York: New Directions, 1974) 46.

Pound's meeting with Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in July 1913 at the Allied Artists exhibit held in the Royal Albert Hall coincides roughly with his receipt of the Fenollosa papers in October of the same year—also during 1913 Pound's friend, the poet, dramatist and art historian Lawrence Binyon, took up a directorship of the newly-established Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. Though the facts of these, at least from the standpoint of Pound's career, quite propitious circumstances are well-documented, it must be stressed that Mary Fenollosa decided to give Pound her husband's manuscripts *because* he was not a professional academic. Pound tacitly acknowledges this fact by remarking in a brief foreword to *The Chinese Written Character* that 'we have here not a bare philological discussion, but a study of the fundamentals of all aesthetics' (3).⁶

It must be said that Pound's anti-philological attitude definitely pre-dates his brief acquaintance with the young French sculptor, making Gaudier's influence over Pound not so much foundational as elucidative, clarifying and bringing into focus artistic ideas about the inherent value of intuitive appraisals of the past he had already begun to formulate.⁷ Just as importantly, by 1913 Pound had not yet developed the mature quick-sampling, wide-ranging and patently anti-philological style of *ABC of Reading* (1934), though the foundations thereof had been laid in a 1910 lecture series delivered to London's Regent Street Polytechnic and subsequently published as a collection of essays entitled *The Spirit of Romance*. Indeed, as with his preface to *The Chinese Written Character*, Pound begins his preface to *The Spirit of Romance* by

⁶ To the extent that Fenollosa disbelieved in a separation of abstract idea from concrete representation, his work might rightfully aspire to a proscriptive poetics rather than descriptive philology, as Pound understood. For a tacit defence of this aspiration's actuality couched as an explicit challenge to Saussure, see: J. H. Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993).

⁷ Pound's first published anti-philological statements happen to be amongst his first publications full-stop. See for instance: 'Raphaelite Latin', *Book News Monthly* (September 1906): 31-34 in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose*, Vol. 1 (London: Garland, 1991) 5-8; and 'M. Antonius Flaminius and John Keats, a Kinship in Genius' *Book News Monthly* (February 1908): 445-7.

saying: ‘this book is not a philological work’.⁸ These lectures *are* philological in a weak sense that they attentively concentrate on medieval texts, but un-philological in a strong sense (as might be strictly defined by someone like Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht)⁹ since they eschew laborious textual examinations thereof, preferring to show rather than to tell; instead of belabouring his audience with questions of provenance, problems of semantics and the ‘presentation of opinion’, Pound proceeds according to a method of ‘selected quotation’, constructing his lectures out of tissues of citations ‘inspired by the Arnoldian conviction that the touchstone line can distil the vital spirit of any given author or work’.¹⁰ What Pound had *not* worked out prior to either receiving Fenollosa’s notes for *The Chinese Written Character* or to seeing Gaudier’s sculpture, reading his manifestoes and conversing with him about aesthetics, was how to be anti-philological in a poem, especially in an epic poem like *The Cantos* that proposed to appropriate so much classical literature.¹¹

*

In a well-known passage from ‘Canto XVI’ (1925), Pound laments the early death of his fellow Vorticist Gaudier, with such brevity that it registers formally the shock of that loss, as well as a recognition of the alacrity with which Gaudier’s promising but

⁸ Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* [1910] (New York: New Directions, 2005) 5.

⁹ In *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003), Gumbrecht limits the meaning of philology to the following five scholarly pursuits: (1) identifying fragments; (2) editing texts; (3) writing commentaries; (4) historicising things; and (5) teaching. Though Pound himself never really defined the word—an inherent denotational ambiguity proved useful as a kind of catch-all polemical cudgel—I take Gumbrecht’s constellation of activities as indicative of what Pound meant by it.

¹⁰ Richard Sieburth, ‘Introduction’, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 2005) x.

¹¹ I borrow this succinct description of Pound’s ‘philological poetics’ from Keston Sutherland, *J. H. Prynne and Philology* (Cambridge University: Unpublished D.Phil dissertation, 2004) 13.

nascent career was dispatched. Gaudier was killed at Neuville-Saint-Vaast on 5 June 1915. The passage in question reads:¹²

And Henri Gaudier went to it,
and they killed him,
And killed a good deal of sculpture

But not many readers will know (for obvious reasons) that an early, *discarded* draft of ‘Canto IV’, written at some time towards the end of 1916, takes Gaudier’s extant sculpture, as well as his Vorticist writings, as pointing towards new possibilities for ‘a synthetic art’ that would provide a ‘model for Pound’s own verse’.¹³ The text of this draft reads as follows (here I include cancelled text, struck through):

~~take ^or^ our historical method : — vortices —.~~
 ffffffffffffffffff
 Sculpture sprang up , ^or^ the best man killed in ^F^rance
 ffffffffff
 Struck by a prussian bullet ,at St Vaast ,
 with just enough cut stone , left here behind him
 To show a new way to the kindred arts ,
 And one man left ,, ~~and ^say^ we have Brzeska’s vortex~~
 Laying a method , quite outside his art ,
 bent to a word . ^Gaston^ Paris , and Reinach had done
 good work , in school book manuals ,

¹² Ezra Pound, ‘Canto XVI’ [1925], *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1975) 71.

¹³ Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and Radical Modernism* (New York: OUP, 1993) 68.

given us France , or Rome , philology ,
 and this young boy hits on the clearer method .
 Vortex , dispersal ~~^times^ the whole history ^turn on honour^~~
 A maze of images , and a full volley of questions
~~What is our life , what is our knowing of it~~

 Say that ^the^ prose is life , scooped out of time
 A bristling node , a vortex£ . And † I am all too plain
 Too full of foot notes , too careful to tell you how
 and why my meaning .¹⁴

This passage argues explicitly that Gaudier's example—practical and theoretical—presents an alternative means to, and a 'clearer method' than, comparative philological methods exemplified by nineteenth-century French scholars Gaston Paris and Salomon Reinach.¹⁵ Gaudier's example, Pound asserts furthermore, surpasses

¹⁴ Amongst these 'not many readers' I myself was included before reading Rebecca Beasley's excellent *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), which transcribes a slightly differently edited version of this passage (here I try to give as literal a version as possible of the document that exists in the Ezra Pound Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, YCAL MSS 43, Box 69 Folder 3101). Beasley's treatment of this text is the most extensive, but see also: Christine Froula, *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Ezra Pound's Cantos* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 74-5; and Mary Ellis Gibson, *Epic Reinvented: Ezra Pound and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 90-1.

¹⁵ Gaston Paris (1839-1903) was a scholar and editor of medieval French and Romance literatures trained in German methods of exact research, so saith *Wikipedia*. Salomon Reinach (1858-1932) was a French archaeologist and art historian specialising in ancient Greece. His *Manuel de philologie classique* (1880-1883) and *Grammaire latine* (1886) were monumental contributions to philological study in the west. Gaudier's method is preferred to theirs, though they themselves are not despised, because they embody, for Pound, a comparatively 'humane' branch of philology, and are therefore not totally without value. About them Pound wrote elsewhere: 'Paris notably, and S. Reinach, especially in his Manual of Classical Philology, have presented detailed knowledge in such a way that one can approach it'. See: Pound, Ezra, 'America: Chances and Remedies IV', *New Age* 13.4 (22 May 1913): 83. And in a prefatory remark to *ABC of Reading* (1934) called 'How to Study Poetry', Pound writes: 'The author hopes to follow the tradition of Gaston Paris and S. Reinach, that is, to produce a text-book that can also be read "for pleasure as well as profit" by those no longer in school; by those who have not been to school; or by those who in their college days suffered those things which most of my own generation suffered' (New York: New Directions, 2010) 11. For more on these philologers' exceptional

Comment [MK1]: *ABCR* p. 11:
 "The author hopes to follow the tradition of Gaston Paris and Solomon Reinach, that is, to produce a text book that can also be read 'for pleasure as well as profit' by those no longer in school; by those who have not been to school; and by those who in their college days suffered those things which my own generation has suffered".

even his own, which the poet considers ‘all to plain / Too full of foot notes, too careful to tell you how / and why my meaning’.¹⁶ The idea here being that up to and including this point in his career—one already employing a ‘philological poetics’ marked, as aforesaid, by the laborious appropriation of classical texts into the bodies of his own works—Pound feels he has been rather too expository, too heavy-handed in tracing the provenance of his *learnèd* style.

The first of Pound’s so called *ur*-cantos begins with a very plaintive and rather long-winded apostrophe to Robert Browning, one that sets out and rationalises the intents of his planned experiment (a poem of some length). Pound of course later revised this opening, moving this complaint to the second canto and limiting it to a mere four lines before abruptly shifting the context to the far east, thus:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,
 there can be but one “Sordello.”
 But Sordello, and my Sordello?
 Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
 So-shu churned in the sea [...] ¹⁷

evasion of Pound’s wrath, see: Anne Birien, ‘Ezra Pound and the Reform of Philology’, *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono: NPF, 2012) 23-41.

¹⁶ It is likely here Pound means his prose is too ‘academic’, although his three draft cantos to which this note is appended were later discarded for a more radically paratactic style that ceased to discursively foreground prosaic self-conscious literariness. For more on these early cantos see James Longenbach’s ‘Three Cantos and the War Against Philology’ in *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) 96-130. Longenbach’s general suggestion that Pound was probably influenced by Ford Madox Hueffer’s scathing critique of Prussian culture in *When Blood is Their Argument* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915) is clearly right given the numerous convergences between that work and this passage. At one point, slamming the ‘professorial hypocrisy of impersonalism’ (i.e., an over-reliance on existing data and on empirically verifiable fact) and advocating a more ‘personal method’, Hueffer writes: ‘I might, in fact, have so overloaded the pages of this work with footnotes that the pages themselves disappeared’ (xii-xiii). Hueffer prefers to allow the single anecdote to displace all existing scholarship on the subject, as a short-cut to the same truth-content—a lesson not lost on Pound.

¹⁷ Ezra Pound, *A Draft of XVI. Cantos of Ezra Pound, for the beginning of a poem of some length* (Paris: Three Mountains, 1925) 7.

Gaudier provided the model for such abrupt contextual dispersions.¹⁸ In the excised passage from ‘Canto IV’ Pound praises Gaudier as the progenitor not only of a ‘new way’ in ‘the kindred arts’, but more specifically, as finding a method ‘quite *outside* his art’, that is, one ‘bent to a word’. The ‘prose’ that Pound equates with ‘life’ and sets in opposition to his overly philological (read: dead) style is Gaudier’s manifesto essay ‘Vortex Gaudier Brzeska’ published in the first issue of Wyndham Lewis’s journal *Blast* in June 1914, an essay offering a radical condensation of the history of world sculpture.¹⁹ As Beasley notes, this essay was for Pound ‘an advance on the best of the philological tradition he had inherited’; in ‘contrast to his own over-scholarly, self-consciously mediated descriptions, Pound commends the vorticist artists for representing history, both past and present, more simply, more vigorously, and in an effectively condensed form’ (123). (We must remember that the vorticists’ chief means of distinguishing themselves from the futurists, with whom the popular media frequently associated them, was a *respect* for history and a desire to recuperate it into the present, rather than a contempt for it and the wish for its annihilation.) Pound praised Gaudier’s ‘Vortex’ because ‘[h]e has summarised the whole history of sculpture. I said he had the knowledge of a German professor, but this *faculty for synthesis* is most untedescan’ (Pound 1974, 106).²⁰ Gaudier’s understanding of the historical development of sculpture is succinct and synthetic, cutting to the quick with concentrated generalisations about basic formal tendencies. In summary of Gaudier’s

¹⁸ According to Pound, Gaudier was ‘a man as well furnished with catalogued facts as a German professor, of the old type before the war-school; a man who knows the cities of Europe and who knows not merely the sculpture out of Reinach’s *Apollo* but who can talk and think in the terms of world-sculpture and who is forever letting out odd packets of knowledge about primitive Africa tribes or of Babylonia and Assyria, substantiated by quotations from the bulkiest authors, and who, moreover, carries this pack without pedantry unbeknown to all save a few intimates’. See: Ezra Pound, ‘Affirmations V’ *New Age* (4 Feb 1915): 380-2; reprinted in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 105.

¹⁹ Henri Gaudier Brzeska, ‘Vortex Gaudier Brzeska’, *Blast* 1 (London: John Lane, 1914) 155-58. The essay is reprinted in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 20-24.

²⁰ ‘Tedesco’ is the Italian word for *German*. That Pound puts it this way is exemplary of his latent cultural prejudice. Emphasis added.

summary: the Palaeolithic vortex tended towards the convex; the Hamitic vortex pushed up vertically; Greek sculpture is ‘derivative’ (by which I think Gaudier means ‘mimetic’, its feeling for form secondary to reason; the Semitic vortex emphasised a ‘splendid squatness’ and created ‘the HORIZONTAL’; but the ‘history of form value in the west’ since the 17th century has been little more than gaseous whistling. In China, the Palaeolithic feeling was intensified in a vortex of maturity and fecundity and lasted 6,000 years until, during the Ming dynasty, they started to admire themselves and lost their conception. Sculptors in Africa and the Ocean islands developed a vortex of convex maturity until they ‘got frightened’ by fevers and other epidemics and transitioned into a vortex of fear. Finally, the sculptors Gaudier calls ‘WE the moderns’—Epstein, Brancusi, Archipenko, Dunikowski, Modigliani and himself—embrace a vortex of individualistic idiosyncrasy, accepting influence from what they liked most, concentrating their disparate reference points into a vortex of ‘will and consciousness’ (Gaudier-Brzeska 1914, 158). Gaudier thereby ranged his eccentric perception against the conventional cultural curriculum, corroborating a claim Pound made only the year before meeting him, namely: ‘truth is the individual’.²¹ Of perhaps equal importance to *what* Gaudier’s first vorticist essay said was the *way* it said it: Pound was joined by Richard Aldington, Wyndham Lewis, Ford Maddox Hueffer and a host of other contemporaries, some usually quite hostile to experimental and avant-garde art movements, in considering it a masterpiece of verbal communication, setting

²¹ Ezra Pound, ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973) 21-43. 33.

forth ‘the whole layout of the fundamentals’;²² its history of sculpture was also ‘*Kulturmorphologie*’, Pound later recalled (Pound 1974, 145; 143).²³

Furthermore, ‘Vortex Gaudier Brzeska’ was of special value to Pound because it was written by a sculptor with no formal training in either prose composition or indeed the English language. For all of Pound’s conspicuous erudition and pedantic obscurity, he was and I believe in many respects remained, something of a populist,²⁴ forever castigating the closed circles of institutionalised education, elitist politics and capitalist finance which led (and still lead) invariably to a whole host of social degradations. So in this sense Gaudier’s piece of art-historical iconoclasm—an iconoclasm that Pound perceived as instantiated by Gaudier’s extant sculptures and drawings and which stood for a ‘new birth out of the guttering and subsiding rubbish of 19th century stuffiness’ (Pound 1974, 144) insofar as they routinely combine patently ‘primitivist’ motifs with modern forms—was an inspirational achievement that just so happened to also bring a number of Pound’s own interrelated ideas into focus, namely: (1) there is no ‘important criticism of any particular art, which does not come *originally* from a master of that art’ (Pound 1974, 20)—Gaudier’s untutored, completely self-taught practicable and critical abilities chimed nicely with a model of ‘anti-academic critic-practitioner’ Pound was already finding congenial (Beasley 37); (2) there is a need for a broad and synthetic approach to aesthetics, one that does not waste its time isolating minutiae for analysis but adopts instead a

²² Though as John Cayley observes, Gaudier’s ‘Vortex’ received little attention from ‘academic historians of Chinese art’ because of the minimal circulation of *Blast* in professional institutions and because Gaudier’s language was ‘calculated to resist critical or academic interpretation’. As I do, Cayley wonders about possible connections between Gaudier’s essay and Pound’s ‘later poetic practice’. See: John Cayley, ‘Ch’eng, or Sincerity’, *Paideuma* 13.2 (Fall 1984): 201-10; 203 and note.

²³ Leo Frobenius first used the term *Kulturmorphologie* in the 1920s; the concept behind it is that individual cultures function like organisms, and move through various stages of development (emotion, expression, application). ‘*Morphologie*’ was itself coined by Goethe; the concept of *Kulturmorphologie* therefore shares features with Romantic *Bildung*.

²⁴ See for instance: Michael Coyle, *Ezra Pound, Popular Genres and the Discourse of Culture* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1995).

generalist attitude towards ‘the arts’ as transhistorical and transnational phenomena, and whose principal of selection is based upon intuitive and therefore often unusual preferences rather than rationalised standards of taste established through formal avenues of education *à la* Royal Academy; (3) that Pound’s penchant ‘for a “visual” criticism over a “verbal scholarship”’ is a valid one, particularly for a poet seeking an alternative to ‘the form of philology being practised in English Departments in the United States’, which were ‘emphasising the scientific, positivist precision of the study of Anglo-Saxon grammar’ and ‘the history of English phonology in opposition to the generalist liberal education’ provision’ (Beasley 17).²⁵

At stake for Pound was more than a constitutional reaction against the apparent drudgery of counting diphthongs in Chaucer; the philological estrangement of literature from the language that transmits it indicated a much broader and more pernicious breakdown of relatedness—and readability. In reading literature according to the protocols of philological correctness, those professing to study and protect it were in fact reading it improperly.²⁶ Gaudier’s essay demonstrated essentially the profound and urgent morality of the artist-scholar because it was so audaciously assimilative, seeing and *feeling* connections professors could not.²⁷

²⁵ For the sake of expedience here I follow Beasley’s succinct description. For a longer account of how between 1875 and 1915 the word ‘philology’ itself ‘reflected a conflict between broad, humanistic generality and narrow, positive science’ see: Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* [1987] (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007) 53-118. 69. For antecedent and subsequent accounts of philology’s adverse effects on the life of the mind respectively, see Hueffer’s preface to *When Blood is Their Argument*; and: René Wellek, ‘American Literary Scholarship’ [1954], *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 296-315.

²⁶ Hueffer gives a fairly accurate rendition of such impropriety: ‘I have tried to point out that Prussia and that the Emperor William II with the aid of his Ministers of Education have done everything that they could to crush out the constructive spirit and to limit academic activities purely to what are known as “Forschungen”. And “Forschungen” Prussia conceives primarily as exercises having no necessary relation to learning, to philosophy, or to the arts, but simply as exercises in discipline. As far as Prussianism is concerned a young man might as well receive his doctorate for tabulating the number of times the letter “t” was defectively printed in British Bluebooks between 1892 and 1897, as for a collection of theories since Sir Thomas Browne’s days as to the what songs the Sirens sang’ (xv).

²⁷ For an account of Pound’s ultimately fruitless attempts to forge for himself a special curriculum that transcended disciplinary boundaries while undertaking graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania and Hamilton College, see: A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) 3-150.

*

During their brief eighteen months of personal acquaintance, Pound would certainly have been impressed by Gaudier's beliefs in the social efficacy of his art. As Gaudier wrote to Sophia Brzeska in June 1911: 'the world is corrupt and the way for me to make it better is not writing letters, but joining my efforts with others to produce works of beauty'.²⁸ With Gaudier's death at the front, the war not only killed 'a great deal of sculpture' as Pound laconically put it, but made apparent for him the immorality inherent in philological systems *per se* (and by the way, though Pound never comes out and says so explicitly, there is a certain poignancy to the fact that Gaudier, the maverick auto-didactic artist about to revolutionise western aesthetics through a programme of formal eclecticism and strong emotional intuition, was killed by Germans). In a 29 November 1917 letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, Pound goes so far as to call philology 'a system of dehumanization'.²⁹ And in a 1918 essay called 'Provincialism the Enemy', he complains that

people see no connection between 'philology' and the Junker. Now, apart from intensive national propaganda, quite apart from German national propaganda, the 'university system' in Germany is evil. It is evil wherever it penetrates [...] It is evil because it holds up an 'ideal of scholarship', not an ideal of humanity (Pound 1973, 191).

²⁸ Henri Gaudier-Brzeska qtd. in H. S. Ede, *Savage Messiah: A Biography of the Sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Kettle's Yard, 2011) 72.

²⁹ Ezra Pound, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941* [1950], ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber, 1971) 126.

As Pound explains elsewhere in this essay, through philology ‘the ‘State’ forgot the ‘use’ of ‘man’; ‘scholarship’, as a ‘function of the state’, forgot the use of the individual’, obscuring and distracting him or her from his or her own purpose, a fact quite apart from Gaudier’s London vortex of interdisciplinary will and consciousness. For Pound, there existed, furthermore, a direct connection between the destruction of Rheims, the massacres of near-Eastern populations ‘and a particular tone of study’. Provincialism in this essay is defined as a ‘an ignorance of the nature and custom of foreign peoples, a desire to coerce others [and] a desire for uniformity’ (196-7). The moment you teach a person to study not for their own delight but exclusively to *instruct* them in scholarly method, the student’s mind is prepared ‘for all sorts of acts undertaken for exterior reasons “of state”’. In sum, philology prepares the ground for what Hannah Arendt would describe later as the ‘banality of evil’.³⁰ Bureaucratic systemisations, of which philology was a pedagogical expression, were for Pound directly responsible for the great war, or what Gaudier called in a letter he sent to Pound from the front ‘the bloodbath of idealism’ (qtd. in Pound 1974, 60).

All of which is probably too harsh. But the point I am trying to make here is that Gaudier’s example in general, and specifically the ability Pound ascribed to him in the footnote to Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character* quoted above—that he could read sinographs *without* any special training—confirmed Pound’s long-held suspicion that the *science* of philological investigation suppressed, if not absolutely then certainly in large part, the aesthetic sensibility. I don’t know if philology can be said to have an ethics in the way that medical or legal practices do, but it certainly has an *ethos* Pound sought to escape, namely the deadening isolation of one fact or

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber, 1963).

specimen from every other.³¹ Gaudier’s maverick interpretations of ideograms coupled with his central aesthetic tenets, that ‘sculptural *feeling* is the appreciation of *masses in relation*’ and that ‘sculptural ability is the *defining* of masses by planes’ in part returned ‘aesthetics’ to its older meaning of sensory perception, but also advanced an idea concerning the value of extemporising about connections between different historical styles. Very much more particularly, we can notice how Gaudier clarifies for Pound the idea that definition is fundamentally a sensory rather than a logical or rational activity. In chapter XI of *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, Pound gives his most important statement on poetics to date, and attempts to summarise his work as ‘a sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were “just coming over into speech”’ (Pound 1974, 82).³² We discern this operation in miniature—and mark how deeply affected Pound was by Gaudier’s untutored capacity to read a writing system as though it were a plastic art—by focusing upon a specific anti-philological technique of the intuitive ‘translation’ Pound adapted from Fenollosa and Gaudier but employed only many years later. In ‘Canto LXXXV’ Pound writes:

Justice, d’urbanité, de prudence
 wei heou, Σοφία
 the sheltered grass hopes, chueh, cohere.
 (No, that is *not* philological) (Pound 1975, 544)

³¹ This caricature of philology—one Pound apes from Hueffer—mimes Pound’s own. For a truthful and sophisticated rebuttal of Pound’s impatient dismissals thereof, see Sutherland’s *J. H. Prynne and Philology* in general and pp. 10-15 for a run-down of Pound’s most impatient claims.

³² Incidentally, Gaudier was also interested in such interdisciplinarity and made drawings that look as though they are just coming over into writing. See for instance Appendix 1.

The line ‘sheltered grass hopes’ refers to the sinograph *chüeh*, ‘1680’ in *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary* (Pound’s source), wherein it is defined as ‘a personal pronoun—she, it, its, his, hers, theirs, etc.’³³ This is the character:



As Carroll Terrell understates it, ‘what Pound sees in the character is not what philologists see’. In the left hand vertical line and its upper horizontal extension, Pound discerns a ‘shelter’; beneath this, Pound reads ‘grass’ and to its right, a radical that on its own means ‘lacking’, ‘which may imply hopes’.³⁴ Hence, according to Terrell, ‘sheltered grass hopes’. Later in the same canto Pound writes:

Whetstone whirling to grind, jòu

tso

li

cymba et remis

Trees prop up clouds (Pound 1975, 549)

Again, Pound has in mind the sinograph *lin* which appears in *Mathews* as 4026. It means ‘long-continued rain’ and consists of, to Pound’s eye, several components.

³³ R. H. Mathews, *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, rev. American ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963) 238.

³⁴ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) 469.

That comprising the phonetic, (here in the lower half) signifying trees, that of the radical, in the upper half, meaning rain. As in:



Such (mis)readings abound in the cantos comprising *Rock-Drill* (1955), poems which in Pound's self-estimation include his clearest statements on ethics. Indeed, Pound conceived of *Thrones* (1959), for example, with which the *Rock-Drill* cantos are a piece, as 'an attempt to move out from egotism and to establish some definition of order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth'.³⁵ Importantly, these most ethically-minded cantos are also the most contentiously philological. Their 'special plane of attention', as Hugh Kenner pointed out, is itself a kind of Poundian philology, one where individual terms are 'exhibited' as never before (532). The point for Pound, a point Fenollosa theorised and Gaudier proved, was that sinographs bore their meanings on their face, their etymologies visibly retaining their processual and creative impulses (25), exemplifying morphological sincerity; each is a literal metaphor, interpretable through attention to the internal juxtaposition of 'radical' and 'phonetic or primitive',³⁶ although it takes an artist's (i.e., anti-philological) sense of 'planes in relation' to see how. The most famous example of which the sinograph *hsin* that Pound, following Robert Morrison, variously translated as 'sincerity', 'trust',

³⁵ Ezra Pound, 'The Art of Poetry, No. 5'. *The Paris Review* 28 (Summer-Fall 1962) n.p. Online.

³⁶ 'I.e., that part of a character which is not the radical' (*Mathews* vii). *Mathews* calls the part of the character that is not the radical is called 'phonetic' when it dictates pronunciation, and 'primitive' when it does not (xxii).

‘faith’, literally a ‘man standing by his word’, because in it he saw represented a human figure (*jin*, ninth radical) beside a mouth with words emergent.³⁷



While Terrell is surely right to suggest that Pound based a number of what he calls Pound’s ‘visual reactions to Chinese characters’ on Morrison’s etymologies, I mean to suggest that it was Gaudier’s aesthetics and not Morrison’s own (now dubious) philology that led him to consider their plausibility. In *Mathews*, the dictionary used during the composition of these late cantos, the ‘phonetic’ aspect of sinographs is given emphasis, and so would have drawn Pound’s attention to the usually composite nature of the sinograph as such. But this kind of rogue etymologising makes ‘sense’ not just despite but because of its scientific improbability. For Pound, as philological laxity rises, so too does any given interpretation’s ethical force.³⁸ This rather curious situation has serious consequences for Pound who, of course, carried on relentlessly about *le mot juste* and the moral obligation to use languages accurately because it turns ‘accuracy’ from a common into an idiosyncratic measure. The ethical obligations of the poet, in this context, therefore, *cannot* but fail to be recognisable by *any* presumed audience for whom he ostensibly writes.

³⁷ For use of this sinograph see *Cantos* (564) and *Chinese Written Character* (41). See also: Robert Morrison, *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language* Vol. 1, Part 1 (Macao: P. P. Thoms, 1815) 118, the edition Pound used until 1945 and upon which he based some of his early readings.

³⁸ Pound was fond of telling an anecdote about Frobenius who observed a school teacher castigating a student for wondering if the letter ‘z’ in the word ‘Katz’ stood for the animal’s tail; for Frobenius and for Pound, this showed intelligent and ‘lively curiosity’ (Pound 1973, 328). Frobenius is a relevant figure here. In a 1934 postscript to *Gaudier-Brzeska*, Pound asserted there is ‘more of Frobenius’ essential knowledge in Gaudier’s four pages than would go into a translator’s forty’ (142).

*

That Gaudier and Pound both conceived of the arts as aesthetic *and* ethical is plain. Gaudier wrote to Sofia that ‘the beautiful and the good are innate’ and that it is the task of artists to work ‘so that ethics and aesthetics become their product’, each a facet of a single thing, their planes in significant relation (qtd. in Ede 60). It was a position shared by Pound who in 1913 wrote in one of his most important essays, ‘The Serious Artist’, that ‘the arts give us our best data for determining what sort of creature man is. As our treatment of man must be determined by our knowledge or conception of what man is, the arts provide data for ethics’.³⁹ For Gaudier, too, aesthetics by definition also excluded science *tout court* precisely on the basis of their capacity to be if not true then at least not wrong without an attendant knowledge of being so: ‘I may make a mistake in a calculation’, Gaudier wrote, ‘but I see at a glance if the completed thing is good or not; there is an instinct inside of me’ (qtd. in Ede 64). As his lifelong anathema for philology demonstrates, Pound remained fundamentally sceptical of the idea that scientific truth claims stand beyond basic human understandings and therefore basic human values, thereby setting the standard which the modern arts must also reach in order to retain their own traditional claims on truth. As such, Pound was not so quick to dismiss the utility of science. His term ‘data’ has all the aura of scientific jargon. Though it is commonplace to think about Pound’s appropriations of scientific jargon (like his appropriations of foreign languages) as indicative of genuine attempts to meld the fields to which they belong, it seems to me that such incursions into the discourses of others might be construed

³⁹ Ezra Pound, ‘The Serious Artist’, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1960) 41-57. 46.

(just as easily) as fundamentally hostile and so, however counterintuitive it sounds, in some way preserving the distinctions such incursions try to efface.

Donald Davie has persuasively suggested that if Pound's forays into other disciplines (history is his example) won for poetry an expanded remit, they also damaged its claim to what has traditionally been fairly non-instrumentalised forms of knowing.⁴⁰ Surely, on one level, Pound appropriates the term 'data' not just to smuggle his (potentially crackpot) ideas past the arbiters of taste and to imbue his own impassioned discourse with the semblance of cool reason, but also uses the word to contest the scientific and philological hegemony at large, as though (mis)appropriating such vocabulary is tantamount to a critique managed through travesty. Yet the imperative in his later work for denotational immediacy interpretable by an 'instinctive' (and creative) reader ultimately led Pound to conceive of a way of writing that mistook legibility for whim, the ingenuity (and ingenuousness) of the reader for the inherent clarity of the thing he or she reads. The result, at least as far as I can tell, is the need for a lot of philological reconstruction in order to get to the how and the why of Pound's meaning, and one wonders if in undertaking such a break from philology he recognised in advance and accepted as a collateral effect the consequential creation of so many *more* philologists.

Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

Universität Bayreuth

⁴⁰ In *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York: OUP, 1964), Davie writes: 'the poet's vision of the centuries of recorded time has been invalidated by *The Cantos* in a way that invalidates also much writing by Pound's contemporaries. History, from now on, may be transcended in poetry, or it may be evaded there; but poetry is not the place where it may be understood' (244).

Appendix one



Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, plate 37, reproduced in Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*