A First Textbook: On *Gaudier-Brzeska, A Memoir* by Ezra Pound

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the French sculptor tragically killed in action on the Western Front when he was only 23, was perhaps the most promising sculptor of his generation. Yet the only available edition of his sculpture and drawings, that of Mervyn Levy (October House, 1965), is hardly adequate: it omits some of Gaudier’s most important sculptures, provides indifferent reproductions of the others, and Levy’s brief introduction is, at best, sketchy. Reviewing the book for *Apollo*, John Parry asked: “Why doesn’t some enterprising publisher reprint Pound’s monograph?”

The enterprising publisher who did just that was James Laughlin of New Directions. In 1970 he brought out an enlarged edition of Pound’s 1916 memoir, including 30 pages of illustrations as well as Pound’s later notes on Gaudier. Now this edition has been reissued in paperback, and although the reproductions are disappointingly small and grainy, one must be very grateful to New Directions for making readily available at low cost one of the central documents of our century on avant-garde art, a manifesto that stands squarely behind Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Frank O’Hara’s “Personism: A Manifesto,” and such important defenses of abstraction in the fine arts as Sam Hunters’s “New Directions in American Painting” or Harold Rosenberg’s *The Tradition of the New*.

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Gaudier’s “sister,” and those who want to know more about the romance must turn to H. S. Ede’s rather histrionic *The Savage Messiah* (1931).

Nor can *Gaudier-Brzeska* be called, in any usual sense of the word, “art criticism.” It is a seemingly random, repetitious, disorganized and eccentric book, a miscellany of personal vignettes, tributes by fellow artists, a selection of Gaudier’s letters from the Front, reprints of his critical prose (part of the “Vortex” essay for *Blast* (1914), appears twice!), Pound’s own “Vorticist” essays of 1914–15, a “Partial Catalogue” of Gaudier’s work, and Pound’s preface to the Memorial Exhibition of 1918.

Yet today, more than half a century after it was written, we can begin to understand *Gaudier-Brzeska* as the formal equivalent of Gaudier’s credo that “sculptural energy is the mountain,” or of Pound’s insistence that “the image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster . . . a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.” For all its seeming chaos, *Gaudier-Brzeska* does have a plan. Pound begins with the plain facts: the news of Gaudier’s death as “part of the war waste,” and reprints a moving obituary by Ford Madox Ford. He then moves rapidly from the “Vortex” essay and Gaudier’s other manifestoes back in time to his first meeting with the sculptor that took place in 1913 at an Albert Hall exhibition, when Pound, admiring a particular green clay statue, and making of its sculptor’s unpronounceable name (“Brzkjk . . . Burrzisszkzk”), was suddenly approached by a young, wolflike, bright-eyed “Greek god,” who said gently: “Cela s’appelle tout simplement Jaershka. C’est moi qui les ai sculptés.” So began the great friendship that quickly led to Pound’s posing for Gaudier. “Some of my best days,” Pound recalls, “the happiest and most
interesting, were spent in his uncomfortable mud-floored studio when he was doing my bust.” Only after this account and the series of Gaudier letters does Pound suspend the narrative and pause to define vorticism in poetry as it relates to Gaudier’s “vorticist” sculptures.

The book does embodies the esthetic of process which is, in fact, its subject matter. We come to understand Gaudier’s art only gradually, just as Pound himself did. The first time one reads the “Vortex” essay, phrases like “the PALEOLITHIC VORTEX . . . Early stone-age man disputed the earth with animals” sound merely pretentious. But when they reappear 100 pages later, after Pound has inspected them from all sides and puzzled out their implications, these odd elliptical statements begin to make sense. Gaudier-Brzeska is, then, as Pound says of Gaudier’s “Vortex” essay, “a remarkable arrangement of thought”; it presents ideas in action, capturing fragments of Pound’s esthetic at the very moment of their formulation.

What is that esthetic? Vorticism is, as most critics have noted, a slippery term, meaningless if we take it to literally as referring to an art based on the vortex or whirlpool—“a rapid movement of particles of matter round an axis” (NED). The “vorticist” art of Gaudier and Pound tended to ignore the “central axis” itself in favor of rapid movement, a movement “caught” and given form. Art historians generally agree that Gaudier’s greatest innovation was his presentation of movement that is potential rather than actual as in The Dancer or Boy with a Coney. It is this energy that immediately attracted Pound to Gaudier’s sculpture. Interestingly he preferred the portrait bust of himself “two weeks before it was finished” because at that point “it was a kinesis, whereas it is now a stasis, but
before the back was cut out, and before the middle lock was cut down, there was in
the marble a titanic energy, it was like a great stubby catapult, the two masses
bent for a blow."

The demand for energy was only a part of Pound’s “New Aesthetic.” The real
thrust of Gaudier-Brzeska lies, I think, in its rejection of 1) mimesis and 2)
symbolism in art. In the 1934 postscript Pound says: “The key word of vorticist art
was Objectivity in the sense that we insisted that the value of a piece of sculpture
was dependent on its shape.” This belief in the irrelevancy of subject matter was
one of Gaudier’s central tenets. “We have arrived at an age,” he says, “when men
can consider a statue a statue. The hard stone is not the live coney. Its beauty
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“the ‘new form’,” he agreed, “... is not a mimicry of external life.” For “the
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The representation of external reality is not, then, the artist’s business. The
French symbolists had, of course, already allowed this precept, positing that the
poet creates his own imaginative world, a construct of internalized meanings and
self-contained symbols. But both Gaudier and Pound equate Mimesis and
Symbolisme and reject both. “I shall arrive at my emotions,” Gaudier declares,
solely from the arrangement of surfaces ... the planes and lines by which they are
defined.” Pound applies the same principles to poetry: “Imagisme is not Symbolism
... to use a symbol with an ascribed or intended meaning is, usually, to produce
very bad art.” The image does not, then, stand for something else; it is the "poet's
pigment"; it is “itself the speech.” The essence of poetry is “precision ... a refusal
to define things in terms of something else.” “If I were a painter,” Pound posits, “I might found a new school . . . of non-representative painting . . . that would speak only by arrangements in colour.” Thus Pound was especially drawn to Gaudier’s late sculptures which, unlike his famous Dancer, a semirealistic nude, were abstractions from animal life. Of Birds Erect Pound says: “This is one of the most important pieces. The representative element is very slight . . . as a composition of masses, I do not think I have seen any modern sculpture to match it.” And indeed Birds Erect prefigures the abstract bird sculptures of Moore, Brancusi and Lipschitz.
Whether poetry can ever become purely “non-representative” is, of course, doubtful, for words inevitably have meanings, and it is here that the analogy between language and stone, poetry and sculpture breaks down. Yet the “presentational” mode advocated by Pound in *Gaudier-Brzeska*—the doctrine that good poetry depends upon the proper arrangement of surfaces, the “positioning” of stark literal images and word groups so as to “Make It New”—looks ahead to Pound’s own *Cantos* and Williams’ *Spring And All*, to the poetry of Black Mountain, the Objectivists, and the New York poets, and it culminates, logically enough, in the concrete poetry of our own day. A recent manifesto of concretism asserts: “We are here to proclaim the word in space . . . . We proclaim the word as well as proclaiming the emptiness around it. When we say ‘line of poetry,’ we mean line as line and not as length of sound. And to ‘color a thought’ is no longer a metaphor but real live color. If our words do not touch you, then you should touch them, feel them, even play with them.” Here, conceivably, is a rationale for the fusion of poetry and sculpture.

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(Henri Directors: $3.25 paper)

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Marjorie Perloff

Marjorie Perloff is the author of The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell (Cornell).

Opium Denizen

Samuel Taylor Coleridge by Molly Lefebure

(Stein and Day; $15)

If I should perish without having the power of destroying these & my other pocket books, the history of my own mind for my own improvement, O friend! Truth! Truth! but yet Charity! Charity!

Biographers of Coleridge start out intending both charity and truth, both total human sympathy and absolute candor. But the deeper they get into the tangled thickets of Coleridge's mind and heart, body and soul, the more they seem forced to simplify and take sides, to prune here and exaggerate there—possibly in support of their own self-esteem and mental equilibriums.

There have been at least 27 new books on Coleridge published since 1960; not to mention 21 volumes, so far, of the official Letters, Works and Notebooks. Each writer takes on one part of this monstrous puzzle of a man, overstates and exaggerates that, and neglects or underplays the rest.

W. J. Bate, for instance, in a popular 1968 biography, devotes six well-informed pages to the matter of opium addiction, and seven, very sympathetic and defensive ones, to "The Problem of the Plagiarisms." But in general he belittles the significance of the latter, and is markedly unsympathetic to what he regards as "psychological reductivity"—"the psychological haste with which we are eager to reduce greatness to the lowest common denominator"; to criticism or biography, that is to say, that tries to explain an artist's works in terms of problems like drug addiction.

Norman Fruman in Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel cites Bate's book as typical of the fault-filled, devotion-blinded misrepresentations of S. T. C. his book is designed to displace. To Fruman, the "problem of plagiarism" is everything. Coleridge's critical and prophetic thought, by which Bate makes so much, is either stolen from the Germans or a nonsensical muddle. As for opium addiction: "In general, I believe, commentators are far too quick to assume a drug influence when confronted with distortions of reality in Coleridge's fantasies or semi-somnolent states of mind."

One must admit that Coleridge's latest biographer, Molly Lefebure, does sometimes seem to have a nark's nose: her central theses are that Coleridge's opium addiction began much earlier than he claimed (not a new idea, that), that the pot took it for kicks, not for cures; and that, though he lied about its role in the creation of "Kubla Khan," opium was the central fact of Coleridge's life, the source of 40 years of misery, inaction, deceit and guilt: his Albatross. (Lefebure reads 'The Ancient Mariner' as a kind of prophetic biography, and structures her