Deuxième partie
Le portrait-manifeste

Portraits of Ezra Pound:
a diachronic approach to visual
and poetic manifestoes

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to compare portraits of Ezra Pound in the visual arts (painting, photography, sculpture, drawing) with his own appropriation of some their aesthetic features. Indeed Pound's poetics often developed in parallel with fellow artists' work. One will also analyze the difference between individual and collective portraits of Ezra Pound, and the way they interact with Pound's poetic masks. How do they influence each other? What influence does the artistic medium have on the portrait itself? Eventually, Pound's portraits often contain elements that are constructed by the poet himself, posing as both canonical and revolutionary.

KEYWORDS: Ezra Pound, Modernism, Wyndham Lewis, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Vorticism

Portraits d'Ezra Pound : approche diachronique de manifestes visuels et poétiques

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article étudie le dialogue entre le discours construit à propos d'Ezra Pound par les arts visuels (peinture, photographie, sculpture, dessin) et la réappropriation poétique par l'auteur de certains de leurs traits esthétiques. D'une part, Pound élabore une poétique qui se nourrit des représentations contemporaines que les arts visuels font de lui. D'autre part, il existe une symbolique différente entre les représentations individuelles de Pound (qui ont aidé à forger le mythe du poète bohème, fou, insaisissable) et les représentations collectives, témoignant du rôle joué par Pound comme un acteur parmi d'autres dans l'ébullition artistique du début du XXᵉ siècle. Comment ces représentations s'articulent-elles dans le temps avec certains masques poétiques d'Ezra Pound ? Quelles conclusions tirer d'une chronologie mettant en parallèle certains autoportraits poétiques de Pound avec les représentations picturales produites au même moment ? Quelle incidence le médium visuel a-t-il sur le portrait du poète ? On montrera que de nombreux portraits sont construits par le poète lui-même, qui cherche à imposer une image canonique tout en étant révolutionnaire.

MOTS-CLÉS : Ezra Pound, modernisme, Wyndham Lewis, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, vorticisme

From very early in his career, Ezra Pound has taken great care to construct a verbal and visual image of himself and to direct representations of him by contemporary writers and visual artists. The portraits of Pound, whether done by himself or by others form a multi-faceted and often contradictory picture of the exiled American poet. Much of the loud rhetoric in Pound's early poetic statements contributes to the construction of his character. Whether in his swift and vehement critical prose or in his poetic experiments with various literary masks, Pound has had a playful attitude towards his own self and role as literary impresario, often strongly dictating what should be said or shown about him.

It is no surprise that the poet should have entitled one of his early volumes *Personae* (1909). In this collection of poems, Pound borrows the voices of French troubadours, Greek and Roman poets, and others, in an attempt to go "[a]gainst the crepuscular spirit in modern poetry" – the phrase constitutes the subtitle to a poem entitled "Revolt", published in *Personae* (Pound, 2003: 99). Wearing various masks, therefore, is a way to renew one's own portrait, and to try on different hypothetical and temporary selves in order to trigger new ideas and experiment with form. Changing masks also makes the delineation of the poet's character more elusive and prevents static portraits from being made. Indeed, the fluidity of modernist poetics resists immobile representations. The dialogue that poetry engages with the visual arts takes up this dialectic, in order to resist immobility and closure.[1] Like many of his contemporaries,[2] Pound's experimental poetry borrows from the visual arts and tries to appropriate some of their techniques while also trying to escape the fixity of the visual work of art. The obsession with change, renewal, movement and dynamism, against the fixity that a visual portrait might bring is also present in Pound's aesthetics of the vortex, which follows his Imagist phase: "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency, one can only call it a VORTEX" (Pound, 1970: 92). This definition comes a few pages after Pound has recalled his famous definition of the image as "the poet's pigment", "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (Pound, 1970: 86). These statements, which date from 1914, are reprinted in the 1970 edition of Pound's *Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*. This suggests that despite time, the link between various arts and the notion of dynamism in fixed forms of art are still on Pound's mind even at a later stage in his career.

Foregrounding the dynamic flux of open texts is meant to counter stasis; this is at the core of many of Pound's experimental texts. How was Pound – the man, the poet, as well as the character – responsible for such varied portraits? What is his influence on portraits of him made by his contemporaries? In other words, what relation does Pound's poetry entertain with the visual arts? In fact, the most famous paintings and photographs of his early career were the result

1   Some of the reflections in these lines were prompted by the reading of James Heffernan's work on poetry and the visual arts entitled *Museum of Words* (Heffernan, 1993: 182-183, 191-192).
2   See Glen McLeod's chapter "Modernism and the visual arts" (Levenson, 2011: 245-267).

of collaboration between poet and artists with common goals. How does this contrast with later photos of Pound, which more strikingly oppose different versions of the man and poet, of the old man and the young bohemian? Why do only a few of these most famous representations of Pound make their way onto front covers of modern editions of his work?

Verbal and visual portraits of Ezra Pound have always coexisted. The aim in this article is to show how they interact, influence or contradict each other. Indeed, the Poundian character is carefully constructed by portraits from various moments of the modernist period, whether through words or pictures. Indeed, they eventually form a whole which bears witness to a certain fascination for Pound.

Many visual portraits of Ezra Pound have been done in paintings and photography, but a few verbal portraits are also prominent. Mainly during his London years, Pound cultivated a bohemian appearance and lifestyle. The way he is remembered by his contemporaries at the time is summed up in Ernest Hemingway's account in *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway recalls how Pound surrounded himself with many artists, such as Francis Picabia, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Wyndham Lewis. In many of his dealings with contemporaries, Pound relentlessly promoted experimental and modern art. Hemingway comments: "Ezra Pound was always a good friend and he was always doing things for people. […] He liked the works of his friends, which is beautiful as loyalty but can be disastrous as judgement. Ezra was kinder and more Christian about people than I was" (Hemingway, 2011: 88). Hemingway then describes his – relatively failed – attempt to teach Pound how to box. Many contemporaries, in the like of Hemingway, made portraits of the poet. Many have underlined Pound's crucial help in getting people's works published or sold, in providing advice and financial help.

Very often, however, verbal portraits of Ezra Pound emphasize visual elements. In his youth, the poet was keen to be noticed. Enrolling at the University of Pennsylvania in 1901, he is remembered thus: "'whey-faced and lanky' by his own description – [Pound] was not a popular figure on campus. Although the 6-footer's sensitive good looks; [*sic*] piercing green eyes and untended mass of red hair commanded attention, he remained aloof from his classmates" (Montgomery, 1972: 39). In London at the beginning of the 1910s, Pound

> appeared to go out of his way to attract attention. He often wore pince-nez [*sic*], a single turquoise earring and Byronic collars to set off his red beard. Ford described one of his outfits as "trousers made of billiard cloth, a pink coat, a blue shirt, a tie hand-painted by a Japanese friend, an immense sombrero. (Montgomery, 1972: 39)

These two verbal portraits of Ezra Pound are the ones which are conjured up by *The New York Times* on the day after Pound's death in 1972. Despite being

verbal portraits, they conjure up some visual elements which denote a pose and a wish to be noticed through some key details.

Nonchalance, striking looks and a colorful character: these can be seen in the portrait of Pound in William Roberts's "imaginative reconstruction" (Tate, n.p.) of Vorticist meetings in the 1962 painting *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel, Spring 1915* [**figure 1**].[3] In this particular collective portrait, artists and literary men are gathered around the recognizable pink first issue of *Blast* magazine and Pound is the only one to be seen in full length. In *Bohemia in London*, Peter Brooker situates the painting in the context of the historiography of Vorticism. Brooker notes that this painting was done at a time when many of the people represented had died, such as Jessica Dismorr, the woman on the left, Cuthbert Hamilton who is represented seated behind Ezra Pound, Edward Wadsworth who is seated on the right, and Wyndham Lewis in the middle of the painting. All these key Vorticist figures being dead at the time of the painting, it "therefore revives the personalities of the core group in its legendary public setting and stands as a celebration of the energies of this moment of collective creative life" (Brooker, 2007: 130). Vorticism has long been seen as revolving around the sole figure of Wyndham Lewis. Roberts' painting, on the other hand, presents it as a collective enterprise. Although the launching of *Blast* did not happen at the date or place mentioned by the painting, "Roberts' painting seeks to mythologise Vorticism and to present his imagined event as the historical document" (Brooker, 2007: 123-124). Richard Cork also signals that the painting is no "accurate guide to the Vorticist Room [of the Tour Eiffel restaurant] […]. Roberts aimed at an imaginative celebration rather than a historically reliable reconstruction" (Cork, 1985: 236). Portraits, which always present partial images of their subjects, contribute to a slanted presentation of literary history. A collective or an individual portrait will not produce the same effect. In the case of Roberts' painting, Pound is presented as part of a collective and collaborative enterprise. In most of the other representations analyzed here, one will consider Pound as sole element in the portrait and this also contributes to a form of « mythologis[ing] » of the poet whose authority is thus established.

Visual portraits of Pound lack a crucial aural component, which critic Iris Barry includes in her description of Pound's language in the 1910s:

> [He] talks like no one else. His is almost a wholly original accent, the base of American mingled with a dozen assorted "English society" and Cockney accents inserted in mockery, French, Spanish and Greek exclamations, strange cries and catcalls, the whole very oddly inflected, with dramatic pauses and *diminuendos*. (Norman, 1969: 193)

This oral dimension that Pound impersonates can be found at work in all his writings, whether in his correspondence or in his poetry. Indeed, they

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3   See list of figures at the end of the essay for all the details about the images commented on.

both use abbreviations and blanks at unexpected moments on a page, spelling evoking specific accents or unusual stresses on words, as well as capitals and expressive punctuation.

The polyphony and plurality of languages mentioned by Barry also constitutes the basis of Pound's poetic self-portraits which illustrate his rebellion against fixed poetic forms and enables him to put in practice his injunction to "Make it New". In *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Pound famously buries his old poetic self in a section entitled "*Ode Pour l'Élection de son Sépulchre* [*sic*]" for the following reasons: it was "out of key with his time", "wrong from the start", "[i]n a half savage country, out of date" (Pound, 2003: 549). The poet also assesses his own era in the following lines:

> The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,
> Made with no loss of time,
> A prose kinema, not, assuredly, alabaster
> Or the "sculpture" of rhyme. (Pound, 2003: 550)

Pound's preoccupation with his own portrait, which in turn influences his aesthetics, is constantly analyzed in analogy with the visual arts, and sculpture in particular. The analogy concerns both the material that poet and sculptor work on, as well as the technique, which is meant to chisel the material and produce clear lines and contours. This is the ideal that Pound sets for poetry, which should also be clear and "hard".

Portraits of Ezra Pound can be divided into at least two distinct stages: the early, bohemian poet in contact with avant-garde artists, as opposed to the old and lonely fascist figure. In many portraits from both types, however, one can see the same provocative element. Indeed, portraits of Pound in painting or in sculpture done by artists with whom Pound was working betray an individualistic and provocative dimension which is in keeping with his shocking experimental poetic work. In photographs taken after his stay at St Elizabeth's Hospital which lasted from 1946 to 1958, the provocation one often reads in Pound's face and behavior is of another kind. A case in point is the famous photo of Pound arriving back in Italy after leaving the hospital.[4] Associated Press, who hold the rights for the photo but does not know the name of the author, have the following caption accompanying the photograph:

> Poet Ezra Pound is pictured saluting in Fascist style on the deck of the liner Christoforo Colombo on arrival in Naples, Italy, July 9, 1958. Pound, 72, plans to live in northern Italy with his daughter, Mary, 32, the wife of Prince Boris De Rachewiltz. Pound was accused of treason because of broadcasts he made from Italy during World War II. He was returned to the U.S. in 1945, judged insane,

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4   See the photo on https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/ezra-pound-daniel-swift/

and confined to a mental institution in Washington, D.C. until April of this year.

The symbolic and shocking dimension of this photograph probably explains its being taken up in many articles (Ormsby, 2017; Montgomery, 1972), internet blogs and, more recently, a book cover (Rival, 2019). Pound seems to explicitly pose for this picture. He seems to have expected photographers while willingly and provocatively taking this pose. The medium is also quite different in this instance: photography gives an impression of immediacy of perception, which contrasts with subjective descriptions or representations of the poet in his early career. In this instance, Pound means to shock. The pose, the fascist salute, the Italian background signal a form of revenge of the poet after his release from St Elizabeth's.

In all these instances, one finds a constant dialogue between Pound's own staging of how others will perceive him, as well as a construction of his own character, which is visible through clothes and confident or aggressive behavior. Although Pound of course asked for literary and pictorial portraits of him by his contemporaries, it is worth noting that fellow artists have had significant influence on the conception of his own poetry.

When he comments on the visual arts, significantly, Pound indirectly conveys a portrait of himself; it is the nuanced literary portrait of a man grappling with his own aesthetic ideals. Further, Pound draws many elements – for his poetic practice – from the portraits that his friends have made of him. Let us focus on two examples of this, Gaudier and Lewis. Each of them allows a dialogue between Pound's contemporaries working on his image, and Pound's recuperation of their aesthetic findings to advance his own poetry, which in turn gradually has personal or autobiographical traits.

Ezra Pound's *Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* was first published in 1916, and then expanded in 1970. The title reads as a homage to the sculptor who died in 1915, at the age of 23. The book opens as a praise for a young but already very accomplished sculptor and aims at expressing the aesthetic beliefs of Gaudier-Brzeska, by reprinting some of his early statements from little magazine *BLAST*. Gaudier's emphasis on vortex, energy, and the simple arrangement of lines and planes have indeed influenced Pound's own formulation of his poetics. Indeed, this homage to the sculptor and the obsession with form occurs at the same time as Pound's own search for a poetic form to suit *The Cantos*, that is, something that might be encyclopedic while also retaining the imagist principles of condensation and concision that he had formulated at the beginning of the 1910s. In *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*, Pound does not only reprint Gaudier's statements on his art, he also reprints some of his (Pound's) own publications. In the process, he carries out a retrospective analysis of his past work. In trying to distinguish between various artistic and literary schools – Impressionism, Romanticism, Imagism, Vorticism, Futurism – the poet singles out the search for personal truth, or "sincere self-expression" as the common point between his work and the sculptor's (Pound, 1970: 85). Pound also comments on his own

progression as a poet: "I began this search for the real in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I continued in a long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks" (Pound, 1970: 85). The polysemous – and sculptural – term "cast" is one example of the way Pound projects Gaudier's ideal onto his own poetry – and the same comment applies to the term "mould" used in the poem quoted above. For Pound, words have to be sculpted indeed.

If the *Memoir* is indeed a praise of Gaudier, it also reads as a self-portrait, a treatise on Pound's poetic ideals, but also as a real portrait in the visual sense of the term. Indeed, in the 1970 edition of the work, the photograph that precedes the title page is a full-length portrait of Gaudier carving the famous *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*. One can see Gaudier at work, bending over the block of stone he is carving, which is as high as his waist. The actual sculpture – Ezra Pound in the making – occupies most of the picture and has a central position, which is all the more obvious as the white stone stands out against a dark background, into which Gaudier's black trousers seem to merge. The photograph that illustrated the 1916 edition, on the other hand, published by John Lane in London and New York, was centered on Gaudier's face, with the unfinished *Hieratic Head* in the background and Gaudier's face turned towards the viewer. Pound's book, therefore – which paid homage to Gaudier, who had died in 1915 – seems to have switched to a book with Pound as its central focus. And indeed, critical reception shows that the work is mostly read by Poundians trying to find out more about the poet's aesthetics than about the sculptor himself. Pound's emphasis on intensity and clarity in Gaudier's work is also programmatic of Pound's own practice. The hardness of the line and plane he sees in Gaudier, but also in Vorticist visual arts – both painting & drawing – Pound tries to make his own for poetry, through the use of the paratactic ordering of information, through broken lines of thought, through the disjunction introduced by swift changes in register to capture the specific tone or mood he wants to describe in a poem. In the progressive displacement of the figures, one can feel a canonization of the American poet, while the French sculptor, dead a long time in 1970, recedes behind his model.

Looking at Wyndham Lewis's portraits of Ezra Pound constitutes another interesting focus. Before painting his *Portrait of Ezra Pound* Wyndham Lewis produced sketches and drawings of the poet, mainly in 1920-1921, which can be considered as preparatory work for his 1939 painting entitled *Ezra Pound* [**figure 2**]. The position of the poet in the painting, reclining, eyes closed, almost sleeping, evokes a peacefulness which is rarely found in portraits of Pound. The collaboration between Lewis and Pound had started in 1914 with the publication of little magazine *BLAST*, which was nearly simultaneous with Pound's article entitled "Vorticism", originally published in *The Fortnightly Review* and reprinted in *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska*. These simultaneous artistic ventures enable poet and artist to draw literature and the visual arts closer to each other. Poetry conceives of itself in spatial terms, and photos of artistic works feature in magazines as companion pieces for literary texts.

Even in recent editions of Pound's works, whether prose or poetry, stylized sketches of Pound by Wyndham Lewis or by Gaudier-Brzeska often figure as the front page illustrations: Lewis's sketch of Pound serves as the front cover of Pound's *Selected Letters, 1907-1941* published in 1971; Gaudier's sketches are on the cover of the 2003 Faber edition of *The Cantos* and of the 1970 edition of Pound's critical *Guide to Kulchur* published by New Directions. The 1996 New Directions edition of *The Cantos*, however, has the title in white capitals with no illustration on the front cover. One photograph of Ezra Pound is placed at the beginning of the volume; it is a sobering and less bombastic close-up on Pound's face alone, in profile, which contrasts with quite a few others.

The best-known portraits of Pound seem to be linked to the Poundian historiography. Indeed, many have focused on Pound the impresario at the center of a network of artists he promoted and defended, thereby contributing to a notion of the twentieth century in American poetry as being a true "Pound Era", to borrow the title of a founding biography of the poet (Kenner, 1971). For others, Pound is to be placed within the more specific context of fascism and political activism starting after the First World War. This often justifies the choice of illustrations among critics, either choosing paintings representing Pound at the beginning of his poetic career–or photographs from the later part of his career. The time frame, the medium used for the portrait as well as the pose are often revelatory of the perspective a critic will adopt. Some photographs of old Ezra Pound, looking pensive and fragile, often echo some of the most autobiographical parts of his *Pisan Cantos* where the loneliness of the poet is emphasized. Canto 76 is a case in point. Indeed, Pound wrote this poem after his arrest for treason against his country in 1945: "As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill / from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor / the rain has fallen, the wind coming down" (Pound, 1993: 478-479).

The poet, therefore, despite his recognizable face and writing, recurrently underlines his loneliness and his failure to make the long poem "cohere" (Pound, 1993: 816). The many individual poetic self-portraits and poetic masks – Pound in turn uses Odysseus or other figures as potential avatars of himself – contrast with the collective dimension of the portrait which is viewed by a whole audience. The multiplication of portraits, from the point of view of the reader or viewer, makes the poet resemble a Janus. It is even more the case with Ezra Pound, according to whether portraits have wanted to show the aesthete, the man or the fascist. This is especially true of Pound portraits used as front cover illustration of books devoted to the poet's work. That the figure of Pound escapes a reductive single perspective as well as fixity is well embodied in a photograph, or rather, as Pound called it, a "vortograph" of him by Alvin Langdon Coburn[5] made in 1917. Although Coburn made several "vortographs", some of

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5   Explanation of the technique on MOMA website : "To refute the idea that photography, in its helplessly accurate capture of scenes in the real world, was antithetical to abstraction, Coburn devised for his camera lens an attachment made up of three mirrors, clamped together in a triangle, through which he photographed a variety of surfaces to produce the results in these images" (https://www.moma.org/collection/works/83725) (last accessed 26.03.2020).

those picturing Ezra Pound are remarkable for their blurriness: lines in these portraits are indistinct in some places, preventing the viewer from perceiving clear lines and a clear image. More particularly in one of the Pound vortographs [**figure 3**], the image is characterized by multiplicity and superimpositions. The blurriness which is thus created, together with the absence of background, gives the picture a sense of atemporality. Pound's multidimensional poetic dialogue with the visual arts enabled him to experiment with poetic language, establish his authority as an experimental writer and, in the process, construct his own myth.

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