William Roberts, Gaudier-Brzeska, and the Vorticist Community

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I

‘We are getting our little gang after five years of waiting’, wrote Ezra Pound to William Carlos Williams, reporting to the American writer on developments in London at the end of 1913. By that date much of the art that was to be called Vorticist was already in existence, and only six months later the signatories of the *Blast* manifestos would make a reality of the gang, or the community, of Vorticists. Both Henri Gaudier and William Roberts appeared on Lewis’s list, as ‘Gaudier Brzeska’ and ‘W. Roberts’, respectively. Vorticism was a collective achievement, the only moment in the last century when artists working in Britain came together in an advanced group as strong as any of those that sprang up so confidently in Europe. It fulfilled Pound’s desire for an effective group, and he never stopped talking about it. But think now of the community’s opposite, the isolated artist cut off from friends by choice, settled at home, yet mentally unsettled and somewhat paranoid, working alone, but working always, up to the very moment of his death. That was Roberts in later life: he died in an armchair at the age of 84, in 1980. Gaudier had no later life because by 1915 he was dead, aged twenty-three, killed by a German bullet.

There was some artifice in the list of names that Lewis appended to the manifestos of *Blast* in 1914, in the sense that *Blast* itself *was* the movement it purported to represent, at least until the Vorticist gallery shows took place in the following year. Yet ‘Vorticism’ also meant the publicity that Lewis generated for his magazine, the interviews he gave, particularly those accompanying the newspaper reports and photographs of activity at the Rebel Art Centre, all to make real the ‘great art vortex sprung up in the centre of this town’, as he put it in the first *Blast*. It is this publicity, this act of gathering disparate talents together in a fragile cause under two brilliantly-conceived names, with manifestos so personal to Lewis that nobody among the Vorticists could really have ‘agreed’ to them – it was all this, I believe, that Lewis meant when he wrote in 1956 that ‘Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period’. William Roberts was infuriated by this remark in the catalogue to Lewis’s Tate retrospective in 1956, and by the more substantial offence that a section of the exhibition was patronizingly entitled ‘Other Vorticists’. Did Lewis really mean that he was the only Vorticist artist? Andrew Gibbon Williams quotes from Roberts’s angry 1956 pamphlet *A Press View at the Tate Gallery* this telling point: ‘Much had been done and said by others in the sphere of abstract art apart from Lewis, before Lewis and the American poet Ezra Pound began sticking their Vorticist labels upon our productions’. (123) Exactly. That would not be disputed today, though it was more difficult to see in 1956. Richard Cork rediscovered the work of the ‘other’ Vorticists in his still-important two-volume study of 1976-77, but Roberts saw no virtue in this publication, jeering at its weight and price, and proudly affirming that ‘In his requests to me for interviews he was not successful’ (‘Art Critics and Dealers’, William Roberts Society website). How useful it would have been if Roberts had been more co-operative – though paradoxically his controversies with Cork, the Tate
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Gallery, Sir John Rothenstein and others, provoked him to spend much time researching, recovering and recording his own earliest work. Unfortunately, he was given to interminable pedantry in public debate, notably in exchanges in the *Times Literary Supplement* between 1956 and early 1958. The dying Lewis was baffled by the pamphlets written against him, and it mattered not at all to Roberts that Lewis was by then seriously ill – he died in March 1957. The truly obsessed do not easily discern the pain of others. Williams concludes that Lewis’s reputation as an innovator was ‘unaffected by the controversy’ (124), and he ends his account of the dispute by suggesting that Lewis never withdrew his admiration from Roberts. He quotes what Lewis wrote in 1915: ‘Mr William Roberts has a very brilliant drawing … called “Dancers”. Infinitely laboured like a 15th century engraving in appearance, worked out with astonishing dexterity and scholarship, it displays a power that only the few best people possess in any decade’ (124; quotation corrected from *Blast* 2, 1915, 77). The anti-Lewis Vortex Pamphlets were infinitely laboured too, but a misuse of that virtue.

There are some striking coincidences between Roberts’s life and Lewis’s. Both were gunners during the First World War, and both escaped to work with the Canadian War Memorials Fund, for which each produced large and successful war paintings – Roberts *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* (1918), and Lewis *A Battery Shelled* (1919). Both were satirists, and both suffered in their careers as a result. Roberts was inclined to caricature individuals in his art, and his 1949 exhibition at the Leicester Galleries (Lewis’s gallery also) was entitled ‘New Drawings, Satirical and Otherwise’. Roberts’s watercolour ‘The Grand Chantrey Stakes’, shows Alfred Munnings on donkey-back with ‘The Will’ under his arm, an allusion to his being administrator of the Tate’s Chantrey Bequest, a body whose insipid purchasing policy Lewis had already caustically assessed during the 1930s. It is likely, says Williams, that this ‘savage caricature’, exhibited in 1952, delayed Roberts’s entry into the Royal Academy, for he became ARA only in 1958, and RA in 1966. That was not what Lewis aspired to, however, and the difference is one measure of Roberts’s extreme conservativism in his later years. The pamphlets about contemporary abstraction and narrative that Roberts published after the Vortex dispute were, writes Williams, ‘uncompromisingly reactionary’. (125) Lewis too wrote against the abstraction of his time in *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (1954), but he was at the same time promoting the work of Colquhoun, Ayrton and (most perspicacious of all), Francis Bacon. He made also a critique of the economic circumstances in which art is produced, and Roberts could have done neither of these things.

Lewis once wrote that he always returned to Percy Street, and we find Roberts there too, at no. 32, on his return from war in 1918. The attraction of Percy Street was the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel, run by Rudolph Stulik; it was here, in 1914, that the dinner launching Blast was held. Roberts was much attached to this place, and he and his wife Sarah (daughter of Jacob Kramer, also an associate of Lewis’s) often dined there. This brings us to one of the great mysteries of Roberts’s œuvre. Why, given his anger at Lewis for claiming to embody Vorticism, did he paint in 1961-62 *The Vorticists at the Tour Eiffel*, and show them as a community of artists dominated by Lewis? Lewis sits at the centre of this group portrait, and is rendered disproportionately large, as though his creative power had caused a bodily inflation. Roberts shows himself sitting next to Lewis, modest and a little inward. As Williams points out, one might have expected satire here, as in the drawings prefixing the *Vortex Pamphlets* of 1956-58. Instead, we encounter a group celebration represented with a studied calm derived from Fantin-Latour’s 1870 *hommage* to Manet, *A Studio at Batignolles*. Proposing this resemblance, but hard-put to establish a motive, Williams suggests that the work is ‘an ambitious attempt at self-aggrandisement; a pointed reminder to the art establishment of his own pedigree’ (127): so Vorticism is legitimised as a route into the Academy shortly after being exorciated for personal reasons. To show what the newly-appointed ARA could do, in 1958-59 Roberts painted *Trooping the Colour*, an unfortunate
choice for a serious history (history!) painting. Williams remarks that ‘Roberts should have guessed that his “tubular” style would render the scene a comic, chocolate-soldier spectacle’ (124), which indeed is the outcome. This painting asks to be read as an accidental but penetrating satire on the Queen, Prince Philip and the entire absurd ceremony. It is now in Tate Britain, with the non-satirical Vorticists at the Tour Eiffel.

Although Williams rightly holds that by the time he reached the Royal Academy in his seventieth year Roberts ‘had lost the exploratory impulse that had vitalised his work until late middle age’ (130), it is nevertheless the case that The Common Market (1963: actually market stalls), The Seaside (1966), and Rush Hour (1971), all sizeable works, do have a vitality that derives from a combination of bright colours and ‘tubular’ design that refers back to the energies of cubism. Sunflowers (1961) has a reflective quality, and is divided down the middle with the sunflowers to the left and people to the right, in a way that shows an intense concern with structure (and with the intensity derived from structure). In his discussion of these pictures Williams sticks throughout to his subtitle and its implicit assertion that Roberts was throughout his career a Cubist. That was Roberts’s own belief, of course, and was a self-description partly designed to fend off the Vorticist tag. However, if we read these late pictures – and indeed Roberts’s figurative work as a whole – as if they were abstractions, then there is substantial justification for use of the term. Pictures as different as Parson’s Pleasure (1944), which is all naked male bodies beside the river at Oxford (a potential gay icon, too), and the 1952 hommage to T.E. Lawrence, The Revolt in the Desert, in which every one of fourteen figures is sumptuously clothed, can readily be transformed by the observer into abstract structures that please and fascinate the eye even as they refer to an unexpected content. In this Lawrence tribute, half-a-dozen complacent-looking camels perform a crucial design function, at the same time reminding us that cubism had a narrow conception of what was possible as content. This, of course, was precisely Lewis’s criticism of cubist still-life and the movement’s limited options for the figure. There remains a major problem: these are planned pictures which lack all spontaneity in the brushwork, and they are often too close for comfort to commercial design, a field in which Roberts ‘nursed aspirations’, as Williams tactfully puts it. (81) Nevertheless, Roberts’s late works can be understood as occupying the place of abstraction and representation at the same time, so that the viewer attempting to read for both is likely to enter a stressful and near-visionary state.

It follows that there is continuity in Roberts’s work. Two early successes are The Toe Dancer of 1914, and St George and the Dragon of 1915. Successful too is the 1920 oil The Cinema (now at Tate Britain) where the blocky abstract structure of screen and walls is set off by the busy, anecdotal, but differently-abstracted structures of the bodies of the lively audience. There is continuity in that this Cubism, if that is what it is, finds its successor-works in the late paintings I have named. So Roberts’s work as a whole acquires coherence, though in saying this I am aware of the homogenising effects of such ‘continuity arguments’, which is why I have stressed the enigma of the Vorticist group painting, and the accidental satire of Trooping the Colour.

Fig. 4. Roberts, The Revolt in the Desert (1952) Southampton City Art Gallery
Williams proposes that a sea-change occurs in Roberts’s work in the 1930s, when angularity is replaced by ‘a plasticity and sculptural quality’. (82) One can agree with this, and yet feel that it is a remarkably congealed and static form of plasticity, by no means distant from its abstracting origins in the Vorticist years of 1913 and 1914. This in turn raises the question of what Vorticism meant. Was there a Vorticist signature? Were the younger members of the group – and Roberts was the youngest – looking over at what Lewis was doing? Did the shared origins in Cubism and Futurism mean that different Vorticist artists achieved related visual languages, whether or not they looked at each other’s work? Roberts, of course, makes everybody into his own individualist (not 'her': Jessie Dismorr and Helen Saunders don’t get much of a mention here). He later argued that the answer to the question What was Vorticism? ‘could only be – a slogan’. Each member of the group underwent separately ‘the varying development according to each talent, of Cubist and Futurist influences’. That is the individualist Roberts of 1957 speaking, and Williams rightly says that it is a judgement not to be disregarded. (27) But there is more to be said. If there was a Vorticist signature, it was a curious stasis, a straining and an almost palpable tension between stillness and imminent movement in the image, and Roberts’s later work still has this quality of forms striving to get away, yet held back by some equal-but-opposite dynamic force. In 1914-15 this quality is shared by Lewis and Wadsworth, Saunders and Dismorr, even by Hamilton and Etchells. Further, if the Vorticists were all working separately in relation to the Cubist-Futurist source, why is there such a common emphasis on finding new content in images of modernity? Roberts’s Cinema is a prime example, and one could add his ‘Drawing’ of a machine-gun in Blast 2. Why are there so many references to two figures – Lewis’s Red Duet and the two dominating figures in Roberts’s Toe-Dancers, for example? There is the double structure of his Study for Two-Step II (1915), and indeed the intimate dance of death between St George and the Dragon. Cubism itself rarely dealt in twosomes. Might this structure have originated with Lewis’s Breton dancers of 1912-13?

Williams’s book has given a new impetus to such questions as these. Beautifully illustrated, William Roberts: An English Cubist shows that Roberts’s work was far more varied in content, and far more interesting in colour, structure, and intensity than has been realized. The many fine illustrations reveal the sustained achievement over seventy years of an artist whose reputation has until now risked being attached only to his Vorticist years.

II

Paul O’Keeffe’s biography of Henri Gaudier (1891-1915) takes its title from a late remark by Ezra Pound: ‘Gaudier was the most absolute case of genius I’ve ever run into, and they killed off an awful lot of sculpture when they shot him’ (301; said in 1965). O’Keeffe’s narrative is characteristically witty, as in the tour de force opening, which contrasts the sculptor’s blow upon the chisel that shapes the marble with the hammer that propels a bullet towards its victim. The unexpected juxtapositions and oblique approaches are similar to those used in his biography of Lewis, but there is less for him to work upon in Gaudier’s short life, and occasional padding occurs, as in the just-too-long account of the Paris floods of 1910. Gaudier emerges from this story as a more difficult man than the softer ‘Kettle’s Yard’ approach leads one to expect. The sculptor of fawns and birds had a cutting edge of his own, and for Enid Bagnold, who knew him quite well and whom he sculpted, he was not so much a friend but ‘More like a dagger in the midst of us’ when he ‘talked like a chisel and argued like a hammer’ (109), grabbing at people as he spoke. But it depends on who is telling the story, and Bagnold is hardly an authority on the stresses of a developing modernism. Gaudier’s verbal (and his associate’s physical) assault on Middleton Murry, and the obstetrically-directed attack on one of his own sculptures, when, despite Horace
Brodzky’s objections, ‘Gaudier continued to stab and gouge out clay from the lower abdomen’ (180) show a personality sometimes barely under control. More than once I felt that Gaudier could have been as much on the road to eventual mental collapse as was his motherly partner Zofia Brzeska.

Gaudier began drawing at the age of six, and a competent work survives from 1902, when he was ten or eleven. Academically very able, he was never trained as an artist, and took up sculpture instinctively in 1910. In his struggle for employment Gaudier lived out more directly than most the antithesis between the life of the businessman and that of the artist, for his journeys to England and Wales were intended to make him an office worker, until he gave up his efforts in that direction when in July 1913 he resigned his post as clerk and translator at the firm of Wulfsberg and Company, ship brokers and timber importers of St Mary Axe in the City of London. He had worked hard for Wulfsberg, whom he liked. Outright bohemianism followed, and the desperate search for patrons began to preoccupy him.

Was Gaudier an English modernist artist? The question looks foolish at first sight, but consider that he first came to London at the age of fourteen for two months in the summer of 1906, and stayed, as O’Keeffe scrupulously notes, at St Stephen’s Square (now Gardens) in Bayswater. In September 1907 he was back in England and Wales on a scholarship, first in Bristol for a year, then in Cardiff from October 1908 to April the following year. By this time his English is already complex and lucid, and he can discuss the Koran (for example) with his hosts, the Smith family in Bristol. On 20 April 1909 he arrived in Nuremberg for a well-documented stay, and moved on to Munich (nothing known), leaving in September 1909. By October he was in Paris, where the following year he met Zofia Brzeska and fell in love with her a little before 18 June 1910. (O’Keeffe’s scrupulousness is catching.) In January 1911 the couple arrived in London, and apart from brief return visits to his home village near Orléans, Gaudier was effectively a Londoner for the remainder of his life.

Gaudier’s knowledge of English is an important factor in his reception. His ‘Vortex’ for Blast was assertively argued, and is almost up to Lewis’s standards in the effective use of capitals and short, dynamic sentences. Fierce argument in stumbling prose risks absurdity, but Gaudier does not stumble. (He doesn’t fail to be anti-Semitic, either, a tendency documented here.) Gaudier’s last piece of writing, which appeared in Blast 2 beneath the title ‘Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska’ and above the announcement of his death, is all the more effective for being so well written, uniting colloquial English with modernist brevity:

HUMAN MASSES teem and move, are destroyed and crop up again.
HORSES are worn out in three weeks, die by the roadside.
DOGS wander, are destroyed, and others come along.

Less appealing is the reactionary economics that views war as ‘A GREAT REMEDY’:

IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS UPON NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS, WHOSE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BECOME NOXIOUS AS THE RECENT TRADE CRISSES HAVE SHOWN US. (33)

‘Noxious’ is perfect, but these are extermination-politics written in the new prose of the European avant-garde.

The community question arises with Gaudier just as it did with all the ‘other’ Vorticists. Consider him in his studio under the arch at Putney, rheumatic from the damp, with an ineffective stove and a fold-up bed, no longer troubled by the noise of trains passing above, while he carved out, amongst other pieces, the Redstone Dancer. Consider, by contrast, the warmth and fellow-feeling induced by the clubby atmosphere at the Omega Workshops in Fitzroy Street, where
Gaudier visited, but never stayed for long. Consider, further back, Pugin at work on a country house, directing a large band of fellow-designers, associates and workmen, all the while attempting to make architecture moral. It is again a question of artists’ communities, and the modernist moment dissolves the authority of the old communities, whether Pugin’s, the Pre-Raphaelites’ or Morris’s, and substitutes tiny bohemian centres of energy whose shifting alliances generate new work that moves against ‘the moral’. Typical of such energies and the resulting productive capacity was the split between Fry’s Omega and Lewis’s Rebel Art Centre, a dispute in which Gaudier successfully managed to stay in both camps. When he left for the war, his unsold work was spread among the Chenil Gallery, Roger Fry, Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme, John Cournos and Alfred Wolmark, names which constitute an extraordinarily various community, not all of its members on speaking terms with each other. Nevertheless, by the time of the Whitechapel Gallery’s ‘Twentieth Century Art’ exhibition of May-June 1914, subtitled ‘A Review of Modern Movements’, Gaudier was firmly associated with the Rebel Art Centre group. He showed the huge and provocative (Hieratic) Head of Ezra Pound, and not a single reviewer mentioned it. At about the same time Gaudier became involved in a not-too-serious dispute in the pages of The New Age with the classicist Richard Aldington (as ‘Auceps’), over what Gaudier thought of as ‘those damn Greeks’ (319, n. 10). At issue for Aldington was the non-classical ‘ithyphallic’ (tumid and Bacchanalian) Pound sculpture, itself perhaps the most conspicuous non-moral statement of the time – and as such not to be spoken of.

How did Gaudier think about his own art? O’Keeffe has him telling Zofia (as ‘Sophie’ Brzeska is here properly named) in 1910 that he was a ‘sculpteur’ (65), and draws attention to ideas which may have emerged in conversations in Paris with a shadowy starving Czech poet named Otásky. ‘[C]ivilizations begin with sculpture and end with it’, Gaudier recorded, prefiguring his contributions to Blast on the history of sculpture. ‘It makes plain, even to the eyes of fools, the power of the human mind to conceive ideas, and demonstrates in cold lucidity all that is fervent, ideal and everlasting in the soul of man’. (66) Contemptuous and hard, yet passionate and universalizing, this is undoubtedly one route into modernism. It was unstable, nevertheless, for at the same time Gaudier was telling Zofia of his ideas ‘about Art for Art’s sake’. She responded with an account of her anarchism and ‘a society founded on motherhood’ (68), the latter idea making her sound like a certain kind of conservative 1970s feminist. In 1910 Gaudier removed his hat in front of The Victory of Samothrace, no doubt to acknowledge his abandonment of Ruskin, of Christianity – ‘that hysterical egoism’ – and of the Gothic, in favour of pantheism and Buddhism. (69) As late as April 1915 the correspondent of the Egoist could see that he was ‘not yet sure of his way, influenced now by Rodin, now by Mr Epstein, now by primitive Gothic, by Chinese and Maori models’ (282; Egoist 1 April 1915). It sounds confused, and it probably was.

Gaudier’s French influences account for the anarchist strand in his thinking, and this is consistent with an oppositional art and the eventual bohemian way of life. In 1910 he read the new illustrated anarchist periodical Les Hommes du Jour, ‘which for Art and Literature does what the Guerre Sociale does for Politics’, and he compared it to Karl Kraus’s Simplicissimus. (47-8) He sympathised with the apache Liaboef, who had killed one policeman and wounded six others, and joined the demonstration in his support called by La Guerre Sociale outside the La Santé prison on the day of his execution. Dissenting from Taine’s Philosophie de l’Art, which argued that environment alone determined works of art, Gaudier took an individualist line consistent with the Otásky conversations: ‘This powerful personality dominating its surroundings is a thing which Taine never explains’. Gaudier also hits upon the issue of art and community: ‘art is so subtle and capricious a thing, so different in the hands of people who have developed together’ (48) that one should simply admire good work when it appears. That view –
same environment, differing work – anticipates Roberts’s eventual position on Vorticism, but it derives from an anarchist individualism applied to creativity, rather than from Roberts’s anti-communitarian inward turn.

If cubism meant an art-for-life to Roberts, what did it mean to Gaudier? O’Keeffe describes an episode in a greasy spoon café in London’s Upper Kings Road when Gaudier showed his friend Brodzky how easy it was to ‘do cubism’. He covered the marble table-top ‘with an animated football match, in which a number of cubist footballers were depicted… The figures were shaded and cross-hatched in the orthodox cubist manner… He knew all the tricks of this cubist trade’, Brodzky later wrote. But Gaudier had, as they say, ‘done the work’ at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1911, sketching the plaster casts of famous sculptures according to a programme: ‘Draw within the major planes the principal masses […] Draw within the major masses the minor planes […] … creating, so to speak, the composition itself’. (90-91) But this interest in planes was the anatomy of cubism, not cubism itself. The cubist footballers were drawn in 1913, the same year as Gaudier’s pastel Self-portrait now at Southampton City Art Gallery. This adroit cubist work is notable for its colour: parts of Gaudier’s face are green, parts black, parts grey, brown and yellow. Out of the background the head is irradiated by startling yellow, orange, brown and pink rays of colour, which merge structurally with aspects of the face itself. So far, so good, and in line with Lewis’s brightly-coloured Vorticist works. But this is a self-portrait, something neither Picasso nor Braque attempted during the analytical cubist phase. Ur-Cubism investigates and breaks down the Other, not the Self. Gaudier represents himself, but he does not investigate himself. And what he represents is the individual as egoist, the eyes contemptuous, mouth and chin sceptical and distancing. Cubism is for him a style, a choice, and a set of mannerisms. It is not the challenge that it was for Lewis in his 1911 ‘Self-portrait’ (Fox collection), where the areas around the distrustful eyes are a self-critique that is without self-regard. As Lewis’s wife put it, ‘one can never say Wyndham ever flattered himself’ (The Bone Beneath the Pulp, ed. Jacky Klein, 2004, 38). Gaudier does not flatter himself either, but he quite likes himself, and is rather fond of his right ear and the apache stare.

Paul O’Keeffe has integrated the already-existing books on Gaudier, notably those by Pound, Brodzky, H.S. Ede and Roger Cole, and made a masterly synthesis of incident, narrative and intellectual context. He has absorbed invaluable material from unpublished sources, notably the manuscripts of Zofia Brzeska’s Matka (Mother), her diary. So we learn that at Zofia’s insistence theirs was a mother-son relationship, consummated only once. The most shocking revelation is that in May 1915 Gaudier’s army unit had, after consultation between NCOs and men, clubbed to death with rifle butts ten German prisoners. This was in revenge for the sinking of the SS Lusitania. Gaudier told his Bristol friend Katie Smith that ‘as retaliation’ (285) they had been
ba-yoneted, but Pound was told the probable truth. Pound omitted this part of Gaudier’s letter from his 1916 Memoir, and all biographers since have suppressed the story. Interestingly, Gaudier describes the pre-killing discussion as a ‘dissertation’ (from disserter sur, to speak on a topic), his usually accurate English breaking down under the stress of reporting an atrocity. The publisher’s decision to reproduce the sculptures in outline and without backgrounds causes them to float oddly upon the page, but the illustrations are enormously helpful, especially those of the earlier drawings. O’Keeffe’s graceful accounts of the sculptures are worth following because he looks closely and well. He has too an unerring eye for the telling detail and for the phrase that makes sense of a life; so the title of the final chapter, ‘A very inviting place for a boche bullet’, turns out not to mean that Gaudier invited death – he did not – but that he had read nothing interesting after a recent Egoist and some stories by Guy de Maupassant, and consequently his head was empty, ‘a desert in the head a very inviting place for a boche bullet or a shell splinter’.

(295) This remark led Pound to invent the story that Gaudier had a premonition of being hit in the head, and then to assume that he had been. A hit on the body is more likely, O’Keeffe says. There was, indeed, no ambient pathos to be imposed on Gaudier’s death; simply the loss itself, the consequent loss to sculpture, and a mystery as to the future development of modernist sculpture in Europe.