MONTAGE AND GESTURE (EZRA POUND / HENRI MICHAUX): TWO POETICS OF THE IDEOGRAM¹

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Abstract || This essay compares the way in which writers Ezra Pound and Henri Michaux incorporate a dialogue with Chinese writing in their thought and poetic works, and specifically with the notion of ideogram as a way to understand the nature of Chinese writing. Both Pound and Michaux share an intense fascination with the pictographic dimension of Chinese writing, which they see as less radically divorced from things than alphabetic writing. Pound, however, incorporates the ideogram as an element that is integrated into the montage of quotations, perceptions, anecdotes, and images through which his Cantos are constructed, while for Michaux, the ideogram serves as a starting point to imagine a kind of writing that would be freed from the prisonhouse of meaning.

Keywords || Ideogram | Ezra Pound | Henri Michaux
0. Introduction: the “Chinese dreams” of Pound and Michaux

In this essay I propose to compare the way in which Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and Henri Michaux (1899-1984) created an intense and fertile dialogue with Chinese writing and poetics in their works, and in particular, with the notion of ideogram, in order to understand its singularity. As a starting point both Pound and Michaux took information about Chinese writing obtained from sources which were, at the time, well credited. From this knowledge, they developed a highly imaginative and speculative reflection on the notion of ideogram (a term which has been questioned in various descriptions of Chinese writing) and an appropriation of the processes connected to it.

My main interest is not an evaluation of the extent to which Pound’s and Michaux’s thoughts about Chinese writing did or did not concur with its effective linguistic reality (or with what present day sinology accepts as an appropriate description of Chinese writing), but rather to understand the way in which certain notions about the ideogram became key in their poetic production, starting points for what Eric Hayot has termed “Chinese dreams” (Hayot, 2006). However, we should not forget that, as in any dream, the transformations that real objects undergo in these dreams are not only symptoms of certain traits of the dreamer, but also modes in which the subject faces the Real and negotiates the split between the imaginary and the symbolic. Thus, the fact that the, at times delirious, theories and variations of these writers could hold a lesson for those who try to understand Chinese writing and poetics rigorously (and who for that same reason often disregard their daydreaming altogether as sheer fantasy) cannot be discounted. This essay is part of a larger project that takes the comparison between Pound and Michaux as a starting point in order to address the dialogue between certain ideas about Chinese writing and culture and different Western poetics and aesthetics in the 20th century (among those of note the Brazilian concrete poetry of the Noigandres group, the work of Chilean poet Juan Luis Martínez, and the cinematography and theoretical production of Raúl Ruiz). In the scope of this larger project, it might be perhaps possible to articulate those aspects of Chinese daydreaming that have something to tell us today.

The idea of juxtaposing Pound and Michaux on the basis of their interest in Chinese writing comes from Richard Sieburth’s brilliant essay Signs in Action: Pound/Michaux, in which Sieburth presents both authors as examples of the cratylist impulse examined by Gérard Genette in his Mimologiques. Ginette describes this impulse as the persistent conviction that there must be “a relation of reflective
analogy (imitation) between ‘word’ and ‘thing’ that motivates, or justifies, the existence and the choice of the former” (Genette, 1995: 5), an idea that contrasts the categorical definition of Saussure of the arbitrary sign. Sieburth highlights how Pound’s and Michaux’s interest in Chinese ideograms opens new questions about the relationship between cratylism, modernism, and the poetics of the sign, and shows the numerous similarities between the way in which the literary projects of the two authors create dialogues with these questions. In this article, I argue that, in spite of the significance of such coincidences, the way in which they appropriate the Chinese ideogram is actually opposed. Pound privileges a montage of discrete units that refer to a historical and cultural constellation, while Michaux’s work originates from a fascination with the calligraphic aspects of the sign which ultimately free it from its subjection to meaning. In Pound, ideograms are immediate signs, which can be read independently of knowledge about their specific linguistic code, whereas for Michaux, these figures distance themselves from a mimetic impulse until they become indecipherable and opaque, which allows them to be seen as a repertoire of untranslatable gestures, and for that reason, more effective than any verbal language.

1. Montage, the dynamic image: ideogram as method

Ezra Pound’s first encounter with Chinese writing occurred in early 1913, when he met the widow of orientalist Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), who trusted him with her recently deceased husband’s notes from his study of classical Chinese and Japanese literature conducted while residing in Japan. Using these notes, Pound published the essay *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry* (later included in the volume of essays *Instigations*, 1920), *Cathay* (1915), with translations of classical Chinese poems, and *Noh, or Accomplishment* (1917), with translations of Japanese Noh drama pieces. Pound also started to incorporate Chinese characters into his poetry, initially a limited number in “Canto XXXIV” (1934) and with more intensity in “Cantos LII-LXX”, published in 1940.

It was in the 1930s and 1940s when Pound (who had resided in Italy since the late 1920s) grew increasingly supportive of fascism and Mussolini (whom he met in in 1933). Pound’s political ideas, which he maintained and spread enthusiastically during the Second World War, led to his arrest by the Allied Forces, his subsequent trial for high treason against the United States, and his confinement in a mental institution, to avoid a possible death penalty. During the years spent in Saint Elizabeth’s hospital, Pound published a series of translations of classical Chinese texts (not using Fenollosa’s drafts as a starting point).}

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work and his concept of Chinese writing had a profound influence in the development of his own work.

In the introduction to his edition of Fenollosa’s essay, Pound stated that it was not “a simple philological discussion, but a study of the fundamentals of all Aesthetics” (Pound, 1920: 357). Fenollosa’s text had a vast influence on 20th century North-American poets, but it has been generally scorned by sinologists, with the recent exception of the lucid critical edition of Fenollosa’s text by Saussy, Stalling and Klein (2008), in which they propose a balanced assessment of the text, able to account for the mistakes, the bold yet arguable hypothesis, and the correct statements stemming from a particular historical and intellectual context. For Pound (and many other poets who followed his lead), Fenollosa’s text, on the one hand, offered a poetics derived from the example of classical Chinese poetry; a new mode of understanding syntax (or of replacing it with paratactical procedures), of practicing poetry based on superposing verbal images filled with meaning, which Pound would first implement in his imagist and vorticist poems, and then later in Cantos. On the other hand, Pound took Fenollosa’s work, with its criticism of logic and scholastic theory, as a model for theoretical and critical work, from which he developed what he called his “ideogrammic method”, a mode of thought based on the juxtaposition of particularly meaningful “luminous details,” the montage of which could produce intuitions more precise than those derived from a systematic reasoning.4 This “ideogrammic method”, combined facts, images, sentences, narrations, and observations from reality to produce a more complex sense of wholeness, a procedure akin to cinematic montage, which Eisenstein was working on in the same years, also with using the model of Chinese ideograms (after having studied Japanese in the 1920s).5

This procedure, present in Pound’s poetry and prose, is probably one of the most influential contributions to the development of contemporary poetry, but also to some of its most unfortunate mistakes. Kevin Power’s opinion on the subject is particularly relevant

Los Cantos emprenden la tarea de definir desde la inmensidad de la historia una cultura ideal, una configuración moderna. Los Cantos despliegan el panorama de su mente, sus opiniones sobre el arte, sobre la usura, sobre la historia, etc. […] En cuanto a sus logros poéticos, los Cantos son desiguales, resultado de impulsos que muchas veces tienen poca o ninguna relación con lo que es poesía, pero nos dan el verdadero espectro de las fuerzas que actuaron en la vida de Pound. Sus teorías económicas pueden o no ser válidas, su concepto de la cultura china estar lleno de errores, y su antisemitismo ser deplorable, pero al final parece que estos juicios y críticas carecen de importancia. El valor de los Cantos reside en lo que podemos usar de ellos, y todavía su verdadero potencial no ha sido explotado. (Power, 2009: 40)

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While not necessarily agreeing with the notion that the ideological content of *Cantos* is not important (actually, I am of the opposite opinion), I believe that any critical assessment of this work needs to acknowledge its contradictions as part of its potential contribution to literature and criticism, and the same can be said for an attempt to articulate the way in which Pound appropriates Chinese ideograms as a starting point for his poetic, political and intellectual project.

In Pound’s concept of poetry as language loaded to the maximum with meaning, Chinese classical poetry is characterized by a high degree of *phanopoeia*, “the casting of images on the mind’s eye” (Pound, 1968: 25). The other two ways of loading language with meaning, *melopeia* and *logopoeia* (connected to the musical and conceptual dimensions of language, respectively) are extremely difficult to translate as they are intimately linked with the specific ways of creating meaning in each language, *phanopoeia* can, on the other hand, be translated almost, or wholly, intact. When it is good enough, it is practically impossible for the translator to destroy it save by very crass bungling, and the neglect of perfectly well known and formulative rules. (Pound, 1968: 25)

The absolute translatability of poetry based on images lies in the protagonism that what we might call verbal images have in Chinese poetry, such as the one cited by Fenollosa: “月耀如晴雪 Moon Rays Like Pure Snow” (Pound, 1920: 361). For Pound, *phanopoeia* is concerned precisely with these verbal images projected in the mind, rather than with concrete visual images or visually material aspects in the poem (such as typography or disposition in the page which are of key importance in the calligrams or “lyrical ideograms” of Apollinaire, or in the concrete poetry of the Noigrandres group). However, it is evident that Pound’s concept also supposes that poetry composed by means of ideograms holds a greater degree of visibility, following on from Fenollosa who argues that “Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols,” given that it is based “upon vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature,” that is to say, it produces a natural relationship between thing and sign: “In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate” (Pound, 1920: 362-363).

From Fenollosa’s reflection, Pound seems at times fascinated by the myth of Chinese writing as eminently pictographic, such as when he affirms that “Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing,” or when he invokes artist Gaudier-Breszka, “who was accustomed to looking at the real shape of things [and] could read a certain amount of Chinese writing without ANY STUDY” (Pound, 1960: 21). Fenollosa’s argument was not limited to this aspect of
Chinese writing, which was, of minor import as he himself noted, but rather it suggested that Chinese possesses a greater capacity, compared to languages like English, to express processes and relations between things:

It might be thought that a picture is naturally the picture of a *thing*, and that therefore the root ideas of Chinese are what grammar calls nouns. But examination shows that a large number of the primitive Chinese characters, even the so-called radicals, are shorthand pictures of actions or processes. (Pound, 1920: 364)

If Pound’s *imagism* seemed, at times, to emphasize images as an isolated, static entity, during his evolution towards vorticism he developed a more cinematic notion of images that stressed their dynamic aspect: “The image,” Pound writes in 1915, “is more than an idea. It is a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy” (Pound, 1973: 375). In Pound’s *Cantos* the poetic validity of this ideogrammic method is put to the test, a work in which the method ceases to be considered solely as a literary technique and acquires a complex ideological and political significance.

One of the first pair of Chinese characters that Pound includes in *Cantos* can be found precisely at the end of the series “The Fifth Decade of Cantos XLII-LI” (1937), which precedes those known “Chinese History Cantos” (*Cantos LII-LXI*, 1940) because of their montage of ancient events considered as counterpoint of contemporary times (specifically Mussolini’s fascist regime). At the end of Canto 51, a partial recapitulation of Canto 45 “With Usura”, we find the expression 正名 (*zhèngmíng*), literally “the rectification of names”, which constitutes, for Confucius, the first step for a good government.⁷

A thousand were dead in his folds;  
In the eel-fishers basket  
Time was of the League of Cambrai:  

正名  
(Pound, 1986: 252)

This nominalist ethic fits perfectly with Pound’s poetic concept, as he believed good writers “are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.” Thus, “If a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays” (Pound, 1960: 32).⁸ In fact, the *Cantos* aimed to fulfill the function of producing a language precise, exact, clean, and intense enough to transform a civilization. We can already see at this point the close connection between fascist ideology and Pound’s vindication of Confucius’ rectification of the names.⁹ There is no room here to expound on the implications of Poundian fascism, a subject which in any case has been widely studied, but let us note that the connection between

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7 | The idea appears in *Analects*, book XIII, chapter 3. In Pound's own translation:  
1. Tze-Lu said: The Lord of Wei is waiting for you to form a government, what are you going to do first? 2. He said: Settle the names (determine a precise terminology). […] 5. If words (terminology) are not (is not) precise, they cannot be followed out, or completed in action according to specifications. 6. When the services (actions) are not brought to true focus, the ceremonies and music will not prosper; where rites and music do not flourish punishments will be misapplied, not make bullseye, and the people will not know how to move hand or foot (what to lay hand on, or stand on). 7. Therefore the proper man must have terms that can be spoken, and when uttered be carried into effect; the proper man’s words must cohere to things, correspond to them (exactly) and no more fuss about it” (Pound, 2003: 711-712).

8 | The statement, which Pound presents as his own, can be considered as a free paraphrase of the doctrine presented in “The Big Preface” to the *Book of Songs*, in respect the relationship of mutual reciprocity between the literary and the political.

9 | This connection is explicit in Pound’s political texts, like “Visiting card”, published in Rome in 1942, that begins with a definition of “fascio” (“A thousand candles together blaze with intense brightness. No one’s candle’s light damages another’s. So is the liberty of the individual in the ideal and fascist state”. [Pound, 1973: 306]) and concludes with an invocation to the Confucian 正名 (*zhèngmíng*) as starting point to order the State.
ideogram and ideology, noted by Jean-Michel Rabaté (1986: 76-105), is certainly one of the pending tasks of this approach to his work.

Throughout the _Cantos_, Chinese characters have an irradiant function that visually condensates the diverse themes that keep intermingling. It is not coincidence that the characters that interest Pound the most are those connected to brightness and solar clarity: for Pound, the ideogram is always a spotlight, a dazzling sign that directly projects its sense on the reader’s mind, a concept that links them to the Neoplatonic mysticism that permeates several of the _Cantos_, for example in the invocation of Eriugena’s maxim “omnia quae sunt, lumina sunt”, which in Canto LXXIV appears next to ideogram \[\text{顯} (xiăn), \] which could be translated as an adjective (“evident, visible, patent, obvious”) or verb (“to manifest, to show, to reveal”).

Pound reassures the reader, who may consider them as a barrier to understanding, that ideograms and other foreign language words only “reinforce the text but seldom if ever add anything not already stated in the English” (Pound, 1986: 256). Characters are sometimes transliterated indicating their tones with a number (Fig. 1), and in other occasions they are left as a mute presence, a vortex of energy that communicates with the gaze of the readers even when they do not know their sounds nor understand their meaning.

Fig. 1 Una página de los _Cantos_ con caracteres chinos transliterados
The fantasy (with totalitarian undertones) of an harmonious convergence of language, history, politics, and aesthetics is contained, to a great extent, within this imagining of the ideogram, conceived as a bright sign that reveals its meaning, making it evident in its graphic presence on the page, without the mediation of code or translation.

2. A liberated writing: gestures, movements

Henri Michaux's relationship with Chinese writing shares some of Pound’s aspects, but in general it is diametrically opposed. Michaux tackles Chinese writing most extensively in his essay Ideograms in China (Idéogrammes en Chine, 1975), but I will focus here on his observations in A Barbarian in Asia (Un barbare en Asie, 1933) and on his drawings for the book Mouvements (1951).

Where Pound sees a language capable of adjusting itself to things in a precise, trustworthy, and at the same time dynamic way, in Chinese characters Michaux appears to discover a possible escape from the tyranny of meaning, of the letter, and of language. For Michaux, the fascination of Chinese ideograms has to do, to a great extent, with their calligraphic, hand-drawn aspect, in contrast with what we might be call Pound’s typographic tendency, which conceives them as a formula that can be iterated prone to infinite variations (on the whole, although with some exceptions, the characters included in the Cantos have not been calligraphed but printed in block). Michaux’s appreciation of the gestural aspect of Chinese writing relates, obviously, with his exploration of the pictorial and its relationships with writing. In fact, one of his earliest attempts in this regard are the ink drawings “Alphabet” and “Narration” (1927), both of which are examples of meaningless writing made of invented signs that only retain the linear disposition from the transposition of the verbal signs. These experiments, which share many elements with the abstract writing produced by Klee, among others, around the same period, are the first attempts in a direction that Michaux’s later works would constantly explore, for example Grasp (Saisir, 1979) and Stroke by Stroke (Par des traits, 1984).

Fig. 2 Henri Michaux, «Narration» (1927), detalle
Between 1930 and 1931, Michaux went on the trip that he later related in *A Barbarian in Asia*. The book contains a chapter on China that includes some notes about Chinese writing. Firstly, it is significant that, in contrast to Poundian tradition, Michaux underlines the difficulty of understanding Chinese characters at first glance, their hermetism to the untrained eye: “C’est qu’il n’y a pas cinq caractères sur les vingt-mille qu’on puisse deviner au premier coup d’œil, au contraire des hiéroglyphes d’Égypte dont les éléments, sinon l’ensemble, sont aisément reconnaissables” (Michaux, 1986: 159). Michaux is interested in the lack of spontaneity of the Chinese characters, the choice of one detail to signify a group of things, and their tendency to compose ensembles (precisely the trait that historians of writing consider in the transition from a group of pictographic signs to a system of ideographic writing [Calvet, 2007]).

For Pound Chinese poetry, because it is based on images, is eminently translatable, whereas for Michaux:

Un poème chinois ne se peut traduire. Ni en peinture, ni en poésie, ni au théâtre, il n’a cette volupté chaude, épaisse, des Européens. Dans un poème, il indique, et les traits qu’il indique ne sont même pas les plus importants, ils n’ont pas une évidence hallucinante, ils la fuient, ils ne suggèrent même pas, comme on dit souvent, mais plutôt, on déduit d’eux le paysage et son atmosphère. (Michaux, 1986: 161)

Michaux points out that a Chinese poem does not present a scene but a collection of possible scenes that will be, just like in cinema unfolded, superposed, and combined during the act of reading. Michaux might not differ greatly from Pound in this respect, but in other aspects the contrast between them is noticeable and significant.

The abstract writing of the sketches from 1927 reappears in *Mouvements* (1952), a book that contains a poem, a series of Chinese ink drawings and an afterword in which Michaux explains that, faced with the insistence that he revisit his compositions of ideograms, he began to try drawing movement forms; lively and rhythmic forms that were inspired by the moment. These bold almost jubilant drawings are, he adds, a way of escaping from words: “Aussi vois-je en eux, nouveau langage, tournant le dos au verbal, des libérateurs” (Michaux, 1992: 201).

![Fig. 3 Drawing sequences from the Mouvements series.](image)
Their presentation inside the book and their position on the page invite reading them as a sort of a sequence of signs. At times, it seems that the same mark is transformed in successive stages of metamorphosis, or rather that it goes from the amorphous and informal towards a recognizable form, which it never fully reaches. At times, we can distinguish embryos of forms, contours of what resemble silhouettes, but we must always ask ourselves whether it is us who is assigning this zoomorphic or anthropomorphic character.

Some of these drawings look like stains, others display what looks like wings, arms, legs, extremities, roots, branches, fins, tentacles, limbs. At times, they look like choreographic directions (in fact, the Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard has created a dance piece interpreting the drawings as such). In general, with the exception of the end of the series, the drawings tend to be constructed as a mark from which thinner, hastily traced lines emerge; lines that do not define a figure but are rather forms outlined against the white of the page. Towards the end of the series, a thin line emerges (as if the brush has run out of steam) that produces drawings, figures with contours in which the line defines a form but does not constitute a body (see Fig. 5). They display a clear tendency towards verticality, towards standing figures, although sometimes in the bottom part of the page we can see horizontal strokes and reclined figures. The number of signs per page and their relative size keeps changing, as if the camera zooms in; sometimes they remain within their own square, sometimes they gather in cluttered groups around the page.

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10 | For details, see <http://www.mariechouinard.com/henri-michaux-352.html> [7/1/2016].
The text in the middle of the series does not serve to explain the drawings, but to reflect, a posteriori, in their enigma; to propose, not an interpretation, but a sort of declaration of principles: we are not told what these signs mean, but from which impulse they emerge, to which impulse they relate. The poem concludes with a long sequence that reflects upon these “signs”:

Signes
non de toit, de tunique ou de palais
non d’archives et de dictionnaire du savoir
mais de torsion, de violence, de bousculement
mais d’envie cinétique […]
Signes non pour être complet, non pour conjuguer,
mais pour être fidèle à son “transitoire”
Signes pour retrouver le don des langues
la sienne au moins, sinon soi, qui la parlera?
Écriture directe enfin pour le dévidement des formes
pour le soulagement, le désencumbrer des images
dont la place publique-cerveau est en ce temps particulièrement engorgée

Faute d’aura, au moins éparpillons nos effluves
(Michaux, 1992: 17-19)

In this final fragment of the poem, the arrogance of palatial and courtly signs is contrasted with those that embody an overflowing testimony of a desire of dynamism, instruments, not for a system of meaning, but for an operation of voiding, of cleaning, of shedding layers. As Michel Beaujour noted in relation to another of Michaux’s text, his whole literary project is organized as a resistance to the tendency of impoverished language to fall back on conventional literary forms:

Il se retranche dans l’indigence. Il choisit de revivre indéfiniment le commencement du langage, et toute son entreprise consiste à tenir le sens à distance. […] Autant qu’il est possible à un HOMME de le faire, Michaux se réduit à la condition d’INFANS, et limite son horizon à celui du ver de terre. Univers mou et asymbolique dont presque rien ne peut être dit, traversé de pulsions. (Beaujour, 1983: 134)

4. Gesture and montage: counterpoints

If characters are, in Pound’s work, centers of irradiating energy that allow history, aesthetics, and politics to be articulated in a coherent vision, a totalizing montage, for Michaux they seem to be attempts at resistance to any meaning, compulsive gestures that project on the page a turbulent interior space, a maelstrom of strokes, a theatre of fleeting shadows that will not allow themselves to be deciphered (although they constantly challenge the reader to do so). Michaux’s drawings are always testimonies of a journey, of an overflowing experience, to which the poet succumbs in full, albeit
without giving himself up to lucidity, as in the compositions created under the influence of mescaline in *Misérable miracle*. Whereas for Pound, in line with the Confucian teachings that so interested him, the ideal was a straight control of will in which words and things are in full accord, for Michaux the only signs worth anything are those that distance themselves from their resemblance to the things from which the ideogrammes originated. “Ne plus imiter la nature. La signifier. Par des traits, des élans,” Michaux writes in *Ideograms in China*: “Tels qu’ils sont actuellement, éloignés de leur mimétisme d’autrefois, les signes chinois ont la grace de l’impatience, l’envol de la nature, sa diversité, sa façon inégalable de savoir se ployer, rebondir, se redresser” (Michaux, 1975: 841).

Michaux’s strokes, from *Mouvements* to *Par des traits* (1984) and *Saisir* (1979), are exercises in a deliberate renunciation of reason, of will and of consciousness (not to be confused with the Surrealist attempt to replace them with their reverse, the unconscious automatism; rather, they must be understood as a struggle to keep them at bay). They are testimonies of a tenacious battle against meaning and against the alienation that any symbolic system necessarily involves.

Both writers, as starting point, take a certain concept of the ideogram as a mode of writing that is radically different from our alphabetic system, a universe of active, dynamic, moving signs. But their explorations take opposing directions: Michaux’s resistance to translatable, and his Utopia of writing liberated from the necessity of signifying, writing turned into pure stroke, gesture, decentered flux, is dramatically contrasted with the Poundian project of a poetry in which the phonic, visible and semantic dimensions of language converge in a complex ideogram which, in a single stroke, directs, designates and provides the world with meaning.
Works cited