THE ENERGY OF LANGUAGE(S):
WHAT POUND MADE OF PHILOLOGY

BY J. MARK SMITH

Epos is not COLD history

—Ezra Pound, letter to Lewis Maverick, 2 September 1957

I. INTRODUCTION

Ezra Pound’s recollection of a conversation some thirty years earlier with the poet Robert Bridges, who loved the Anglo-Saxon lexis, and who strongly approved of the archaizing in Personae and Exultations, is the source of a passage in Canto 80:

“forloyn” said Mr Bridges (Robert)
“we’ll get ‘em all back”
meaning archaic words and there had been a fine old fellow named Furnivall

Pound wrote elsewhere that Bridges’s enthusiasm for words like forloyn was not what he wanted to hear at a time when he “was just trying to find and use modern speech.” Forloyn is middle English hunting jargon, a word of French origin. A noun form of the word signifies “a note of recall” sounded by a hunter to bring home stragglers left behind by the main pack. Once one knows that, forloyn is just right, what with the traces in Bridges’s slogan of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s musings about the “reversionary wealth” of the English language. But perhaps, as Theodor Adorno did in the case of some German contemporaries’ writings, we should register the presence of “a greed for the archaic”? Given Pound’s carefully-framed quotation of Bridge’s remark, the author of the Cantos cannot be simply pigeon-holed as a nostalgist of the Teutonic tongues or sloganeer for linguistic authenticity.

In the passage above, notably, Pound sets “forloyn” into a sentence showing only that it belongs to the class of archaic words. The word’s meaning can only be guessed at. Pound does put forloyn in a sentence
in the final lines of his translation of Guido Cavalcanti’s Sonnet 23 (‘To Dante, rebuking him for his way of life after the death of Beatrice’):

Yet if thou’lt read this sonnet many a time
That malign spirit which so hunteth thee
Will sound forlorn and spare thy affrighted soul.

English scholars, from Thomas Tyrwhit to Frederick Furnivall, made Chaucerian words available to readers and poets. Pound, in this translation, produces an equivalent to Cavalcanti’s Italian that is not so different—in its reliance upon philological glossaries, at any rate—from Thomas Chatterton’s procedures in inventing a Rowleyan English. “Get[ting] ’em (all) back,” of course, calls for synchronic use as well as historical finding. Not only, in the Cavalcanti lines, does Pound recover an archaic word; he uses it in a sentence that activates its meaning. More often in the Cantos, however, he does not, with the result that the reader is repeatedly put in a difficult place—difficulty such that one might be prompted to ask what the very idea of “use” entails.

I work in what follows with an idea of philology, not only as a body of knowledge concerning defunct languages, or as an institutionally transmitted and endorsed expertise in the deciphering of such languages and the texts in which they survive—but as an archive of historical usage charged with synchronic possibility. The imperative “to find and use” extends from the barb of the present moment back into lexical and textual domains unimaginable before the age of philology. Surveying many of the modernist writings of the early twentieth century, one can very plausibly speak of an interleaving of poetic and philological tradition. A high point, or perhaps a limit case, is Canto 20.

How did it come to be widely accepted that the findings of philology could be taken up in this way? The answer is multi-stranded, of course, but there is an intellectual line at play here without which we cannot understand how Pound hoped that this canto, and his whole long poem, would be read. It is the one I will henceforth call energy-of-language thought. This eighteenth-century strain of philosophy of language—named “rhetorical expressivism” by Hans Aarsleff, who has convincingly shown that it was not an exclusively German or Romantic development—includes such thinkers as Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, Denis Diderot and (decades later), its best-known exponent, Wilhelm von Humboldt.

The word “energy” is often associated with Pound’s version of modernism. It comes up in accounts particularly of Pound and Wyndham Lewis’s vorticism (itself a derivative of the futurisms of Russia and
Italy). This energy refers to the dynamism of youth, of the avant-garde or the cultural vortex. It is commonly understood to arise out of the economic and intellectual vitality of the modern city, so much itself a creation of the productive, destructive, and distributive power of machines driven by electricity and the burning of fossil fuels.\textsuperscript{10} I would not wish to dismiss the importance of this mechanico-physical sense of energy in Pound’s work. But it is the older, Aristotelian inflection—the one that has to do with activity or actuality as distinguished from potentiality or latency or capacity—that we need to hold to if we are to think through what Pound supposed a poet might do with the linguistic and historical findings of the scholarship of the previous two centuries.

Pound’s much bruited animus against philology was more apparent than real. It was directed more precisely against “cold-storage,” the interpretive and evaluative stasis into which late-nineteenth-century academic authority seemingly locked old poems.\textsuperscript{11} Its opposite is not a non-philology or a dadaism cut free of scholarly knowledge but a poetic practice become ever more supple in its attentiveness to the energies of the different languages and the different historical moments. Pound’s key premise is that the power of language latent in the poetic phrase, however ancient or alien, is never wholly \textit{ergon}, hence always capable of being returned to activity through its use by a reader or speaker.

Aarsleff notes that the term “action” has a Latin rhetorical lineage. In Cicero and Quintilian, \textit{actio} means “delivery,” that is, the physical performance of the speech—the sort of thing that can be brought off more, or less, energetically. Indeed, the Greek-descended “energy” and Latin-descended “action” have, with their cognates, for two thousand years been caught up in a complex semantic and philosophical interchange. By the eighteenth century, to define (in English or French) “energy” as a kind of “action”—or “action” as a kind of “energy”—means to engage with inescapable terminological tautologies. To explain what Aristotle meant by \textit{energeia}, for instance, one has to bring into play the words active, activity, or actuality. The term \textit{energeia} was invented by Aristotle, and first occurs in his \textit{Protrepticus}. According to Stephen Makin, Aristotle coined the word in order to avoid the philosophically “misleading and restrictive connotations” of the ordinary Greek terms that were available.\textsuperscript{12} As Aristotle used it in the \textit{Metaphysics}, Book \textsuperscript{Θ}, and in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} as well, \textit{energeia}, activity or actuality, was opposed to \textit{dunamis}, potentiality or capacity, with application not just to non-human things but also to the human soul. \textit{Energeia} is to \textit{dunamis} as “what builds is to what can build, and what is awake
to what is asleep, and what is seeing to what has closed eyes but has sight."\textsuperscript{13} Between the time of Aristotle and the beginnings of modern philosophy of language, ancient Roman and Renaissance rhetorical commentators had more to say about \textit{enargeia} ("vividness" of expression) than about the difficult concept of \textit{energeia}.\textsuperscript{14} But Humboldt, in his great essay of 1836 on the diversity of and within languages, reinterpreted and recontextualized the play of the \textit{energeia/dunamis} opposition.\textsuperscript{15} By asserting the value of linguistic process (\textit{energeia}) over against fixed form (\textit{ergon}), Humboldt turned speaking and listening, and reading and writing, into activities of never-ending potentiality, as well as never-fulfilled capacity.

I should make a side note about Pound’s fondness for the word “charged,” which seems to be allied to the metaphors of energy and language. The word is older than its relatively modern use in the context of energy and language. The word comes to English from medieval French, and there is little difference in sense between Pound’s use of charged and Diderot’s use of the past participle in his 1751 \textit{Lettre sur les sourds et muets}: “Plus un poète est chargé de ces hiéroglyphes, plus il est difficile à rendre; et les vers d’Homère en fourmillent [The more a poet’s work is laden with these hieroglyphs, the harder it is to translate; and the verses of Homer abound in them].”\textsuperscript{16}

Hugh Kenner’s \textit{The Pound Era} (1971) puts some notion of energy at the center of its argument. Throughout this long book, Kenner makes much mention of what he calls “patterned energies,” which he understands to be analogous in the linguistic and cultural realm to the topology of knots in the physical (\textit{TPE}, 145–7; 156). Imagistic images, charged poetic phrases, etymological roots, the luminous details of historiography: for Kenner, these are all examples of patterned energies. These energies are impersonal and anonymous, like natural forces. They persist through time as does, say, a worked golden brooch recovered by archaeologists from one of the several cities unearthed on the site of Troy. The problem with Kenner’s thesis—regardless of the title of his book—is that he largely occludes the question of the patternmaker. He might note, in passing, for instance, that the phrase “sound slender” is “a willed patterning, against usage,” but in general says little about will, decision, choice, freedom, desire, action, or activity (\textit{TPE}, 112).
The Pound Era continues to be inescapable for anyone thinking about Pound and his legacy. One must acknowledge as well that it is in many respects a polemical book: one that fought, quite successfully, to secure Pound’s intellectual reputation. But some of its assumptions are surprisingly crude, particularly its characterizations of eighteenth-century and Romantic-era aesthetics, philosophy of language, and lexicography. The Pound Era has been very influential (not necessarily in directions that Kenner would have endorsed): consider for instance the impetus Marjorie Perloff—another polemical caricaturist of pre-twentieth century aesthetics and philosophy of language—picked up from it in identifying a “Pound tradition” vs. a “Stevens tradition” in American poetry. In short, the very considerable simplifications in Kenner’s “Augustan norms” (TPE, 100) or the “Romantic quest for purity” (TPE, 109) or the “Romantic quest for the primitive” (TPE, 110) have had consequences. By obscuring and denigrating the eighteenth-century thinkers’ emphasis on agency, and by denying and distorting the complexity of that period’s philology, a supposedly anti-Romantic modernist poetics has established a story of its own daring upon literary historical reduction.

Two brilliant sequential and interconnected chapters in The Pound Era—“The Invention of Language” and “Words Set Free”—seem to me to set out what is most problematic about Kenner’s argument through the book. In “The Invention of Language,” he suggests that “the poetic of our time” (TPE, 96) is based upon the nineteenth-century philological discovery of capital-L “Language” (TPE, 120). The accomplishments of this great era of philology (roughly 1800–1860) were based upon an understanding of languages as entities subject to natural laws in the manner of an organism (on the model of Georges Cuvier’s comparative anatomy). Kenner transports the very same doctrine of natural language into The Pound Era when he tells a story of “[philologist Friedrich Diez] displaying with the aid of laws stated by Grimm and others the gradual differentiation of Latin into seven or eight tongues, [and] texts registering this process century by century as fossil bones the differentiation of phylae” (TPE, 111). The point of the analogy is hard to quarrel with; but Kenner goes further, crediting the quasi-scientific work of historical and comparative Germanic scholarship with vanquishing what he calls “the Romantic Indefinite” (TPE, 123) or “Romantic Time” (TPE, 554), thus creating “the poetic” of modernism. In application to Pound, Kenner claims as well that Canto 20 is best read in the light of this philological vision of languages as “discriminated phases of Language” (TPE, 120). By philology, Ken-
ner means the naturalistic reconstruction of “roots and developments” \((TPE, 100)\); he means etymology.\(^{10}\)

“Words Set Free” considers capital-S “Speech”: the synchronic dimension of language, and usage in the broadest sense (“language on living tongues” \([TPE, 128]\)). Words and phrases, when used outside of their historical and customary contexts, are released or set free for other meanings or associations or intimations. Will, decision, choice, freedom, desire, activity and related notions are, once again, almost entirely missing from Kenner’s formulation. Symbolist poetics of the late nineteenth century, he argues, tried to harness the present-moment functioning of language as (merely) an “ecology” \((TPE, 128)\). Hence it would be a mistake to try to arrive at an understanding of a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. Such a poem, made of words set free, produces only aesthetic “effects” \((TPE, 130)\). Pound, Kenner writes, “retained misgivings about the entire enterprise” \((TPE, 137)\). And Kenner too, it emerges, has misgivings not only about symbolist poetics, but about any synchronic consideration of language. Kenner thinks Mallarmé et al. led a few anglophone modernists (such as Eliot) astray—back towards “the Romantic Indefinite.” In fact, Kenner’s reductive conflation of symbolisme and synchronic linguistics serves to ward off complexities of historicity and currency that cannot be easily explained by a notion such as “patterned energies.”\(^{20}\)

The overall implication of Kenner’s two chapters is that language in both its diachronic and synchronic aspects functions regardless of the agency of individual speakers. As I mention above, Kenner’s further claim is that the naturalism of the nineteenth-century philologists is an anti-Romantic stance. The work of Aarsleff, particularly \textit{The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860} and \textit{From Locke to Saussure}, shows how that characterization is inaccurate.\(^{21}\) The comparative philologists were in fact enthralled by German Romantic notions such as that of the ancient and co-related origins of language and epic in spontaneous and collective expressions of the people or the folk.

In moving toward a reading of Canto 20, I will consider Pound’s interpretation and valuation of Homer in the light of the linguistic theorizing and philological work of French scholar Michel Bréal (1832–1915) who, in Aarsleff’s judgment, was pivotal in shifting the study of language away from the potent blend of naturalism and Romanticism that was typical of the “roots and developments” school. It was important, for Bréal as much as Pound, that Homer’s epics be recognized as something more than spontaneous expressions of the folk—as, indeed, masterly works that ranged among and drew from
current linguistic possibilities, so brought together the most durable and yet the most charged phrasal arrangements. Let me be clear, however, that what was not at stake for Pound (nor Bréal) was the question of whether the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* were authored by one man or woman, that is to say, by a lone genius. Pound and Bréal share an anti-Romanticism insofar as I believe both would say that the theory of oral-formulaic bardic composition, no less than that of spontaneous epic, denigrates the activity and ignores the historicity of “find[ing] and us[ing].”

For Pound, finding and using is an activity (*energeia*) in Aristotle’s, and not only Humboldt’s, sense. The *Cantos* presents the reader with a number of formal difficulties. Tackling this long poem is a process never likely to come to completion; it demands a stretching, or even a full realization, of readerly capacity. The difficulties include, but are not limited to, paratactic assembly of lyric passages with those of other genres in a non-epic longer form; bagginess of the collage method itself in contrast to the brief intensities of hieroglyphs embedded within individual cantos; and abundance of untranslated archaic and foreign words and phrases, many of these set free of anything like a sentence illustrative of usage. The first two sorts of difficulty are, arguably, unprecedented in the European poetic tradition. The third sort of difficulty—which I’m most interested in here—is different in degree but not kind from the difficulties of poetic language in the Homeric texts whose production Bréal sought to explain. One of Bréal’s key concepts was the “plasticity” of Homeric language: “plasticité qui vient du mélange des dialectes et de la présence des formes appartenant à différents âges” [plasticity that comes from a mix of dialects and from the presence of forms belonging to different ages]. The modern poet and reader, to a still greater degree, possess the capacity to deal with plasticity of poetic language.

At one point at least, the theoretical assumptions of modern lexicography coincide with those of modernist poetry: both work with diachronic finding and synchronic use of historically and geographically diffuse linguistic materials; but both give ultimate priority to the synchronic (not exactly the same as the new). A premise of modern dictionary-makers as well as of Bréal’s *plasticité* is uniformitarianism, which holds that the basic processes productive of the “origins” of language are to be found as much in the uses of the present moment as in any vanished past. James A. H. Murray, the second and most influential editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, wrote in his preface to its first volume (1888 edition):
The creative period of language, the epoch of “roots,” has never come to an end. The “origin of language” is not to be sought merely in a far-off Indo-European antiquity, or in a still earlier pre-Aryan yore-time; it is still in perennial process around us.²⁴

Bréal, in “De la forme et de la function des mots” (1866), wrote “we must not place the origin of languages only at the beginning of races; we create them every moment, for the changes they undergo are our work” (quoted in LTS, 307). Or, as he puts it in “Le langage et les nationalités” (1891), “we are all at every moment of the day, creators of language . . . [that is, we are] all the time active in the production of speech.” (quoted in LTS, 396). In other words, the synchronic dimension of a language has priority over any representation of it in a diachronic mode (over what was once called philology). The synchronic dimension of a language, which includes reading as much as speech, is a realm of actuality. Archaic and foreign forms are not excluded from it. The eighteenth-century formulations that Pound inherited acknowledge the always changing historicity not only of “language,” but of the languages. Still, it is no exaggeration to say those formulations shatter upon the powerful Saussurean distinction between diachronic vs. synchronic realms, especially where they suppose a quasi-magical latency inhering forever undimmed in certain poetic phrases. Bréal’s plasticity, as we will see, while it succeeds and modifies the eighteenth-century energy-of-language theories, never relinquishes the key concept of an energeia of use.

II. PHILOLOGICAL FIND AND SYNCHRONIC USE

As one of his first examples of “the Romantic Indefinite” negatively affecting literary judgment, Kenner points to Matthew Arnold on Homer.

For Matthew Arnold it had seemed urgent business to find some vernacular cadence adequate to the Homeric moral qualities: Homer is rapid, Homer is plainspoken, Homer is plain-thinking, Homer is noble, so Arnold affirmed in 1860 with no real certainty (ever since Wolf’s Prolegomena) that there ever was a Homer, let alone a Troy. Like the Victorian God, the Victorian Homer may well not exist, but it does us good to talk as if he did. (TPE, 43)

It’s not a fair citation. Kenner doesn’t mention the context at all: a debate of the 1860s between Arnold and Francis W. Newman (the Cardinal’s brother) about translation. Their dispute about the most
apt English in which to render Homer turns to a large degree on the linguistic complications introduced by philologists. Arnold’s views on this matter were hardly “Romantic” even as Kenner uses that term; but nor were they those of the German comparativists.

In his 1861 essay “On Translating Homer,” Arnold took Newman to task for all the strange old English words he had used in his 1856 version. In this instance Newman, who had a considered preference for archaism, would seem to be the forerunner to Pound. Newman justifies his word choices by imagining that the modern reader should stand in the same relation to the language of his translation as a fifth-century (BCE) Athenian would have to the language of Homer’s Greek:

The entire dialect of Homer is essentially archaic, and abounds with words difficult and obscure to an Athenian, and even of uncertain sense, or explained only by special erudition. A translation therefore ought to be as much Saxo-Norman as possible, and artistically might well be in a style so antiquated as (I am aware) would now find few readers.25

One would have to go back to Old English (“Saxo-Norman”), Newman supposes, to find a philological equivalent to “the dialect of Homer.” Newman’s reasons for using an antiquated English diction are curious (presumably fifth-century Athens is taken to be the definitive Homeric audience because it included Plato), but defensible. In his translations of Arnaut Daniel or Cavalcanti, Pound also justified his diction by an idea of historical equivalence.

Arnold distinguishes the “certainty” a poetic translation creates in its audience from that application of disciplinary knowledge that he calls philological certainty. He argues that Newman—and all the other translators of Homer into English—have as yet failed to render the signature qualities of Homer’s verse in the original ancient Greek (its simplicity and intelligibility, the swiftness of its movement, the nobility of its diction).

Arnold’s emphasis on simplicity and intelligibility could, arguably, be traced back to the prescriptions of the English plain style. But there is more going on in his discussion of the matter. Arnold picks up on Newman’s claim that many Homeric words would be “difficult and obscure to an Athenian.” Comparing the hypothetical Athenian’s difficulty to a Victorian reader’s familiarity with the Authorized Version of the Bible, he insists that there is a difference between being “philologically certain” about a word’s meaning, and “poetically certain.” There are different sorts of difficulty and obscurity. Newman, he thinks, has introduced philological difficulties into his translation—for
instance, Old English words like “bragly” or “bulkin” that almost no living speakers of English were familiar with, in order to translate Homeric words that for all their obscurity would have been at least familiar to (“heard over and over again” by) Athenian-era audiences:

If Homer’s poetry, as poetry, is in its general effect on the poetical reader perfectly simple and intelligible, the uncertainty of the scholar about the true meaning of certain words can never change this general effect. . . . How many words occur in the Bible, for instance, to which thousands of hearers do not feel sure they attach the precise real meaning; but they make a meaning for them out of what materials they have at hand; and the words, heard over and over again, come to convey this meaning with a certainty which poetically is adequate, though not philologically. . . . [H]is clear poetical sense about the words, not his philological uncertainties about them, is what the translator has to convey. Words like bragly and bulkin offer no parallel to these words; because the reader, from his entire want of familiarity with the words bragly and bulkin, has no clear sense of them poetically.26

I conclude that what Arnold describes as “thousands of hearers . . . mak[ing] meaning” out of “the materials they have at hand” is the very same activity—firmed up by custom and authoritative repetition—that produces the one-off “effect” Kenner calls words set free. Arnold imagines ordinary readers as well as philologically expert ones; crucially, he imagines the linguistic and intellectual work of human agents, not impersonal systems. In a way not at all alien to Pound’s key concerns, Arnold sets out the challenges inherent to finding and then using unfamiliar words in poems.

While the debate between Arnold and Newman has the look of a disagreement about the uses of scholarly knowledge in translation, that cannot be the case, since both students of Homer relied on knowledge accumulated by classicists over a long period of time in order to stake out their respective positions. It’s really a debate about the limits of synchronic uptake: about the plasticity, we might say, of collective usage. If the two positions were indeed the philological (Newman) vs. the poetic (Arnold), one might think Pound closest to Arnold, who values most highly a “clear poetical sense” of the lines to be translated. “Tain’t what a man sez, but wot he means that the traducer has got to bring over. The implication of the word”: so Pound to W. H. D. Rouse, coaching him on a translation of Homer’s Odyssey in 1935.27 Then again, think of “fosse” and “dreory” and other Saxo-Norman words in the translation that accounts for most of Canto 1, not to mention the Latin phrases that conclude it. Newman, we have seen, claimed that
“the entire dialect of Homer is essentially archaic.” Pound, with the confidence of philologically-informed modernity, would not have considered the poetically charged part of any language essentially archaic. Where Pound departs radically from Arnold’s commonsensical view is in being able to imagine the uptake happening almost instantaneously, rather than after countless iterations of the word. He asserts the existence of readers just as able to arrive at “adequate” poetic certainty when confronted by a foreign word or phrase as when confronted by an unfamiliar English one.

III. POETRY AND LANGAGE D’ACTION

Pound’s fascination with the energy of certain expressions belongs, by whatever circuitous byways of transmission, to a theoretical tradition extending back to Condillac’s idea of a gestural proto-language. In his 1913 essay “The Serious Artist,” Pound accounts for the relation between form and emotion by sketching a hypothetical evolution of poetry from “the yeowl and the bark”:

You wish to communicate an idea and its concomitant emotions, or an emotion and its concomitant ideas, or a sensation and its derivative emotions, or an impression that is emotive, etc., etc., etc. You begin with the yeowl and the bark, and you develop into the dance and into music, and into music with words, and finally into words with music, words suggestive of music, words measured, or words in a rhythm that preserves some accurate trait of the emotive impression, or of the sheer character of the fostering or parental emotion. (LE, 51)

The more advanced or abstracted codes of art and literature can never leave this basic repertoire of embodied movements and rhythms wholly behind them.

As Condillac puts it in his Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines (1748), “the language of action is the seed of the languages and of all the arts that can be used to express our thoughts.” The ancient Roman rhetoricians’ attentiveness to the bodily conditions of speaking made them forerunners of those eighteenth century language philosophers who supposed that language was neither an Adamic legacy nor a rational construct. For Condillac, language was a malleable artifact invented and modified over a very long time by changeable beings who had learned by means of physical signs to give to their thoughts and intentions a relatively fixed form and so communicate them. The evolved languages were slowly and variously built up in each case from

J. Mark Smith
a proto-language of “action,” a simple lexicon of physical gesture and vocal expression. The necessary conditions for this proto-language, and so the natural qualities of language animals, were (in Aarsleff’s paraphrase) “natural sociability, spontaneous emotive expression, and sympathy.”"\(^{29}\) This *langage d’action* was one in which any signifying, repeatable gestural or vocal movement could hardly be separated from its newly-agreed upon signification, since that meaning was to begin with emotional or sympathetic or energetic—that is to say, came into being as a natural expression of the sociable human body.

Another tenet of Condillac’s thought is that every language has its own “genius.” I take this phrase to mean that a language of action follows its own path through time. Its achieved resting points, its recognizable and repeatable signs, are contingent. There is no reason to suppose that if one could rewind the history of any single language to its beginning and replay it that the same modern language would result. In its formative stages, the energies of a language and its earliest possibilities—what Condillac calls its “analogies”—play through its greatest poets’ productions; the traces of their linguistic imaginings will permanently channel and organize the energies of later speakers. In “The Genius of Languages,” Condillac describes such change this way:

> [Eminent men] see and feel in their own particular way, and to express their manner of seeing and feeling they are obliged to imagine new expressions within the rules of analogy or with as little deviation from those rules as possible. Thus they conform to the genius of the language while at the same time adding their own [genius]."\(^{30}\)

Conversely, lesser writers, who indulge their own inventiveness while failing to conform to the genius of their language, may contribute to its decline. In “How to Read,” Pound elaborates on this formulation with a historical-evaluative schema something in the manner of Thomas Love Peacock’s ages of iron, gold, silver, and brass. Without drawing any strong distinction between linguistic and literary innovation, Pound identifies “inventors,” “masters,” “diluters,” and worse (*LE*, 23–24).

Condillac was interested, as Pound would later be, in the linguistic implications of the near-impossibility of translating poetry. The individuating genius of each language, its historically contingent development out of a *langage d’action*, is the glory of poet and literary patriot. It is a perpetual thorn, however, in the side of the translator: “the reasons that prove that two languages cannot have the same character also prove that the same thoughts can rarely be expressed in both with the same beauties.”"\(^{31}\) Condillac considered poetry to be the form that
comes as close as possible, among the modern, more intellectually nuanced arrangements of a language, to an expression of its early *langage d’action*, and so to the primordial genius of the tongue. The poet is the one most faithful to whence a language has come. Hence Condillac’s (and his contemporaries’) interest in inversion of word order in Latin poetry, something that offended some neo-classical French sensibilities but that Condillac understood to be a primordial subordination of abstractable meaning to gestural and rhythmic proto-sense.  

Diderot takes up Condillac’s *langage d’action* in the context of gestural sign languages. Aarsleff, in his introduction to Condillac’s *Essay*, quotes a sentence written by a scholar named Nicolas Beazée from the 1784 *Encyclopédie* that illustrates why it was Diderot and likeminded contemporaries considered the gestural language of the mute and the deaf to be fundamentally poetic: “Energy is the quality that in a single word or in a small number of words causes us to perceive or feel a large number of ideas; or which by means of a small number of ideas expressed by words excites in the mind sentiments of admiration, respect, horror, love, hate, etc., which words alone do not signify.” The “single word” or the “small number of words” that evokes ideas or sentiments otherwise inexpressible leads Diderot (in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* [1751]) to a germinal critical notion: that of “l’hieroglyphe” (or “l’emblème”). Poetry, Diderot argues, is not merely

Un enchaînement de termes énergiques qui exposent la pensée avec force et noblesse, mais que c’est encore un tissu d’hieroglyphes entassés les uns sur les autres qui la peignent. Je pourrais dire, en ce sens, que toute poésie est emblèmatique [A linking of energetic terms that manifest the thought with force and nobility, but a web of hieroglyphs jostling one against the other as if to paint the thought. I might say, in this sense, that all poetry is emblematic].

The web or tissue-like quality of the emblem, Diderot says, arises out of the poet’s manipulation of a language’s sonic and rhythmic resources. Its hieroglyphic quality is the same strength that Pound would recognize in certain lyric *trouvailles*—the blending of rhythm and “analogy” into a phrase whose mobility and semantic suggestiveness is greater than that of its parts. Homer’s epics abound in them. But the deaf or mute person communicating gesturally also uses hieroglyphs in this sense. Shelley, in his “A Defense of Poetry,” would refer to the poets as “those who have employed language [rather than sound or stone or canvas and paint] as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts.”

In the hieroglyphic of language that we call poetry, the simplicity
and power of langage d’action has been made to serve a more arcane practice of signification. Pound sets a Bernart de Ventadorn phrase into the beginning of Canto 20 because he considers it—and the phrases from Catullus and the Odyssey accompanying it—to be a trouvaille. A trouvaille in Pound’s sense is the same as a hieroglyph in Diderot’s, but with a further complication. It is a find or a discovery in two related senses: it is what the poet of every language seeks—a phrase whose sonic contours and whose meaning have seemingly melted together; and it is what the work of philology allows a modern reader to uncover for herself—a foreign phrase possessed of its own untranslatable, essentially “poetic” qualities. There are three such trouvailles in the first three lines of Canto 20:

Sound slender, quasi tinnula
Ligur’ aoidé: “Si no’us vei, Donna don plus mi cal,
Negus vezer mon bel pensar no val.”

(C, 89)

The third—inside quotation marks—is from Bernart de Ventadorn’s lyric “Can par la flors” [“When the flower appears”], lines 23–24. In rough metaphrase, it reads “If I don’t see you, Lady for whom I must burn, / Even not seeing you can’t match my beautiful thought of you.”

In a letter of October 1920 to Agnes Bedford, Pound glossed the Ventadorn poem as follows:

First strophe is about new leaves and flowers bring back fragrance to the heart. / Second—insomnia—due to natural cause usual at the season. / Then—where man’s treasure is there will his heart be also. / Then—and if I see her not, no sight is worth the beauty of my thought—which is the trouvaille—can’t spoil it by botched lead up. / There is no literal translation of a thing where the beauty is melted into the original phrase.

Pound is willing to summarize the lead-up, and even to offer English equivalents for the Provençal words, but will not grant that a translation is possible of the trouvaille itself. For this reason, when he sets such a non-English phrase into the text of a canto, it will not be translated, though it will often be preceded or followed by a rough equivalent. And so, under the cover of philology, Diderot’s Homeric hieroglyph, having already travelled some distance from a bark or a yeowl, makes its reappearance in Pound’s long poem.
IV. THE STREAM

Concerning the difficulty of the hieroglyph, Diderot made this remark: “L’intelligence de l’emblème poétique n’est pas donnée à tout le monde. Il faut être presque en état de le créer pour le sentir fortement” [understanding of the poetic emblem is not granted to everyone. In order to be strongly aware of it, one must almost be in the state of mind of the emblem’s maker at the moment of its making]. From one side, his prescription has an elitist cast; from the other, however, it points to how, from moment to moment, and reader to reader, the energy of a trouvaille may rest merely latent. Like Diderot, Pound seemingly credits a handful of idealized readers with an enlightened reading practice that is equal to the task of releasing a poetic hieroglyph’s energy of meaning.

It is, moreover, an awareness of perceptual/verbal discrepancy, inarticulacy, or expressive lack that sets in motion the linguistic energeia of poet, philologist, or reader. As Pound writes in Gaudier-Brzeska, “any mind . . . worth calling a mind” will discover “needs” beyond the existing categories of his or her language. In a periodical article from 1936 that approved of the pedagogical aims of C. K. Ogden’s and I. A. Richards’s Basic English project, Pound made this defense of his use through the Cantos of untranslatable classic and foreign forms:

I have never intentionally used . . . any classic or foreign form save where I asserted: this concept, this rhythm is so solid, so embedded in the consciousness of humanity, so durable in its justness that it has lasted 2,000 years or nearly three thousand. When it has been an Italian or French word, it has asserted or I have meant it to assert some meaning not current in English, some shade or gradation.

When Pound places a trouvaille in the midst of current phrasings, he is recognizing it as a diachronic fact, but more than that. To recognize word or phrase—whether Catullus’s “quasi tinnula”; the Homeric epithet for the Sirens’ song (“ligur’ aoide”); or Ventadorn’s Provençal sentence—not only as a philological datum, but as an expressive form that has a “durable . . . justness,” is to welcome it into the synchronic spread of current linguistic possibility.

The charged language that a trouvaille exemplifies, however, has an antinomy at its heart. On the one hand, we have the transient, ever-changing character of a natural language. Pound, in “The Serious Artist,” puts it this way: “While Proust is learning Henry James, preparatory to breaking through certain French paste-board partitions, the whole American speech is churning and chugging, and every other
tongue likewise” (LE, 36). That is why a modern poet must actually work “to find and use modern speech.” On the other hand, and as often, Pound insists on the durability of certain formulations—the Homeric πολυφλοίσβοι, or others that we come across in Canto 20. The drive to say something with precision makes certain energetic, untranslatable phrases permanently useful; the very same urge to express nuanced thought and feeling in altering circumstances can be a motor for the “churning and chugging” mutation of a language.

We might wonder, then, how the philological uptake of a *trouvaille* is to occur. In the case of these favored words and phrases, Pound militates (“I asserted . . . it has asserted . . . I have meant it to assert”) for the desirability of an insertion of the classic or foreign form into the lexicon of the English speaker. Here is a further paradox Pound does not sort out: namely, that one’s recognition of the justness of a *trouvaille* depends on one’s being able to turn it into another sign, to translate it, in short. Now the solidness and durability of a 2000-year-old *trouvaille* implies that semiosis has, or should have, come to an end with respect to this phrase, since no equivalent series of English words will catch its shade or gradation. And yet, in order to be convinced of its enduring justness one must translate a *trouvaille* into at least some set of roughly equivalent poly-lingual or verbal and non-verbal signs. If one cannot translate it, it will remain a hieroglyph in the most common sense: a sign arcane, inaccessible, locked up. The interpretant signs into which one must translate a *trouvaille* will not have been immune to what Pound calls historical “chugging and churning”; nor will have the words of the original language of the *trouvaille*; so why, then, would the value of the *trouvaille* itself remain fixed?

The older Pound, I believe, eventually acknowledged—without claiming to solve—this interpretive-temporal paradox with his rather enigmatic coinage of the 1950s, *sagetrieb*. It is a non-idiomatic portmanteau word combining German elements *sagen* (“to tell,” “to say”) and *Trieb* (“life force,” “drive”), as in the following:

I refuse to accept ANY alphabetic display as final AND the sagetrieb different spellings used to indicate the stream where thru and whereby our legend came latin, portagoose, french. Epos is not COLD history.

Pound explains why he did not wish to standardize the English transliterations of Chinese ideograms through the later Cantos. I take *sagetrieb*
to be the stream of usage apprehensible in the present moment. Its braidings are multiple ("latin, portagoose, french"), though any one speaker at any particular moment can only apprehend the stream. As contemporary lexicographer Sidney Landau defines it, usage "refers to any or all uses of language, spoken or written." He employs a rather elaborate version of the same metaphor of flow or stream that thinking people almost universally fall back upon in order to depict for themselves the immediacy of the present moment:

Usage bears the same relation to other aspects of language as the bloodstream does to the endocrine hormones. As the bloodstream circulates the hormones, which affect every aspect of growth and development, so does the vast flow of words in sound and writing constitute the medium through which speech is perceived as intelligible, meaning is discerned, and grammar is understood.\(^5\)

Landau’s parallel formulation is helpful to this discussion, since it makes clear that Pound’s *sagetrieb* also describes “all uses of language, spoken and written” in the synchronic dimension of a language—that is, at a cross-sectional moment in its current or flow or stream. The difference is that Pound’s *sagetrieb* may include archaic and foreign words and phrases brought into spoken or written play without them necessarily having become available for use in a decipherable sentence. The Emil Levy sequence of Canto 20 is an instance of “use” in this privative or unfulfilled mode.

V. “NOIGANDRES”

Pound’s dramatization of a meeting between his younger self and the author of an eight-volume dictionary of the langue d’oc shows a philologist making meaning out of the “materials . . . at hand” just like an ordinary reader. Pound represents Levy speaking out loud a crux of medieval Provençal textual scholarship, an imperfectly transcribed word from one of Arnaut Daniel’s lyrics that, reconstructed as “noigandres,” appears to be a *hapax legomenon* (a word that occurs only once in the body of a historic literature, and whose meaning is doubtful for that reason). The different transcriptions in these lines of the word’s first syllable—NOI-, noi—stand for different possible pronunciations. Pound’s Levy attempts, with an almost perceptible physicality, to make the word’s sound shift into some recognizable, and hence meaningful, form:

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*J. Mark Smith* 785
And he said, Now is there anything I can tell you?
And I said: I dunno, sir, or
Yes, Doctor, what do they mean by noigandres?
And he said: Noigandres! NOIGandres!
You know for seex mon's of my life
Effery night when I go to bett, I say to myself:
Noigandres, eh, noigandres,
Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!

(C, 89–90)

In a moment of hermeneutic impasse, the sheer meaningless sound of an unknown word can always hold off thought, no matter how energetic the sounding.

It is definitive of the concept of usage that we cannot “use” words that are strange to us. Levy’s baffled and bemused citation of noigan-dres, which brings this lexical artifact into the realm of non-philological, ordinary language, is not “use.” Then again, Pound has evidently found a way to put such material to use in a poem. This sequence displays a philologist’s knowledge of the diachronic dimension of Provençal. But it also shows English, of—circa 1917—the current moment, working as a synchronic system, in which, as Bréal had put it in an essay of 1887, “each new word that is introduced in the language causes a perturbation analogous to the introduction of a new element in the physical or social world” (quoted in LTS, 391). Pound is far from denigrating history, or the historical-comparative study of languages. He demonstrates, instead, how any deep understanding of historicity must take stock of both dimensions of language. Philological knowledge only ever enters, or re-enters, a language in the synchronic present. The “stream where thru and whereby our legend came” includes philological discourse as well as ordinary banter about philology.

Ultimately, we learn, Levy was to decide that the pseudo-lexeme “noigandres” was a textual corruption of a phrase from the Arnaut Daniel poem: d’enoî ganres. In the troubadour-inspired spring sequence that follows, Pound builds his climactic lines out of the whole of the trouvaille to which it belongs (“e l’olors d’enoî ganres”: the perfume [of that place] wards off [a form of the verb gandir] world-weariness or ennui [enoî]):

You would be happy for the smell of that place
And never tired of being there, either alone
Or accompanied.

. . . . e l’olors—
The smell of that place—d’enoî ganres.

(C, 90)
The scene illustrates Pound’s sympathetic relation to philology and textual scholarship; it gives the speaker an opportunity to bask in the glow of Emil Levy’s success, and to express a shared love of Provençal poetry. More than this, though, when Pound’s Levy exclaims “Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!” the reader is being encouraged, at several points, to ask the same question. That is, he is prompted to ask not only what “d’enoi ganres” meant for Arnaut Daniel and his contemporaries, but what can it mean now, in interaction with the contexts and possibilities of English in its current state. As we eventually learn, “noigandres” is a non-signifying sign, an empty placeholder. Why introduce it, then, into the canto? Pound’s use of “noigandres” sets up a textual situation in which a reader encounters linguistic historicity in both diachronic and synchronic modes. The poem steers us away from immediate pursuit of the philologically authorized meaning of “d’enoi ganres” in order that we might hear the very faint perturbation “noigandres” makes in the synchronic system known as English.

VI. BETWEEN THE FOLK AND THE PHILOLOGISTS

While the energy-of-language thinkers acknowledged the unique heritage of each language, they would not have approved of the mixing and mingling of languages—as in Pound’s “latin, portagoose, french.” A language has its own virtù not to be adulterated. As Condillac puts it in his Essai, some languages, particularly ancient Greek, have an advantage in this regard. Others, apparently, are handicapped from the beginning:

Languages which are formed out of the leftovers of several other languages . . . face great obstacles to their progress. Having chosen something from each, they are nothing but a bizarre heap of heterogeneous expressions. 45

More than a century after Condillac, Bréal, fascinated by what he called Homer’s linguistic “plasticity,” dispensed with nationalist prejudice and opened the way for Pound’s appropriations. The polylingualism of the Cantos complicates indeed the eighteenth-century expectation that a poet, in the manner of Homer, show the highest possible fidelity to the genius of his mother tongue.

In his early thirties, Pound registered his critical disagreement with a certain aspect of German Romanticism by loudly and colloquially supporting anyone who, in his terms, “smacked the folk song idea.” What did he mean by this phrase? In a letter to Harriet Monroe in January, 1918, he expressed approval of an editorial comment in Poetry:
Naturally pleased to see the folk song idea smacked again. Even an eminent London Musical critic has recently got on a platform and said “all folk songs have authors and the authors are individuals.” The blessing of the “folk” song is solely in that the “folk” forget and leave out things. It is a fading and attrition not a creative process.  

Willinsky quotes this passage in order to make a polemical point about what he sees as the OED’s perversely disproportionate use of illustrative quotations from famous authors (what he sees as the dictionary’s poet-as-Adam doctrine). In Pound’s 1918 letter, undeniably, the “individual author” vs. “the folk” opposition stands out—to be deplored, if that is one’s inclination. But more important is what Pound says about “fading and attrition,” a matter closer to his true concerns. The blessing of forgetting is that it smoothes and edits without the intervention of individual agency. The folk forget, one might say, because they don’t write things down, because they perpetuate poems by memory and repetition; because they are not philologists. Then recall Pound’s animus against philological cold storage. Somewhere between the poles of refrigerated fixity of text and meaning, and the “fading and attrition” of non-literate flux is Pound’s ideal of poetic activity. What Bréal called the plasticity of the language of Homeric epic also describes this middle range of self-conscious linguistic historicity.

In The Spirit of Romance (first published 1910), Pound is scathing about the eminent late nineteenth century scholar Gaston Paris’s commentary on the Chanson de Roland. The young Pound’s observations will have an oblique bearing on Canto 20 (first published 1917), which includes a lengthy passage in which an Italian prince identifies, insanely, with the dying Roland. What comes to matter to Pound, beyond the story of Roland himself, is the difference between its “fad[ed],” orally-transmitted texture and the differently preserved weave of Homer’s epics. Pound discerned no trouvailles in the Song of Roland, nor anything like the quality that Bréal had named plasticity.

Bréal sets plasticité explicitly against “la théorie de l’epopée spontanée et populaire” as propounded first by Friedrich August Wolf, and later by Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Jakob Grimm (PMCH, 1). The theory of spontaneous and collective epic proposes that the creative energy of the people has at certain times in the history of a language spontaneously generated not just folk songs but epic poems. It proposes that in some primordial time the roots of the languages (excluding, of course, those formed from the leftovers of others) were produced, along with the epic poems, by the collective work of all speakers—“ce fut le travail commun de tous” (PMCH, 23). This theory,
Bréal notes, carries the signature of the time of the first stirrings of Romanticism: “Herder est le contemporain de MacPherson, lequel est cité expressément en exemple par Frédéric-Auguste Wolf [Herder is the contemporary of MacPherson, who is expressly cited as an example by Wolf]” (PMCH, 124). It is no accident, Bréal suggests, that this theory’s champions were contemporaries of the spurious Ossianic poems, which were fabricated as if on order to meet the demand for an ancient poetry of the folk.

Paris, who in linguistics had “called himself [the] first disciple” of Bréal (LTS, 394), came under fire from his former teacher for being seduced by “quelque chose d’élevé” in the spurious notion of the spontaneous epic:

Pour mèriter ce nom [d’épopée], il faut non seulement qu’ils aient un fonds populaire et national, mais qu’ils sortent de l’âme du peuple. Ils sont, a-t-on dit, une affirmation éclatante et enthousiaste de la nationalité. Ce sont eux qui mènent au combat, qui célèbrent les dieux de la patrie, qui chantent les aspirations, les rêves ou les ressentiments de tous. Il y a quelque chose d’élevé dans cette conception qui peut s’autoriser de noms comme Lachmann et Gaston Paris. Il appartient aux philologies spéciales d’examiner jusqu’à quelle point elle s’applique à telle ou tel épisode. Il se peut qu’elle convienne parfaitement à la Chanson de Roland et aux Nibelungen. (PMCH, 109–110)

[To deserve the name, epic poems should not only have a popular and national source but should arise as if from the soul of the people. They are, it has been said, a brilliant and inspired affirmation of nationality. Epics lead [the people] into battle, epics celebrate the gods of the fatherland, epics sing the aspirations, the dreams, or the animosities of all.

There is something exalted in this conception that gains authority from names such as [Karl] Lachmann and Gaston Paris. The branches of philology, however, must consider to what degree it applies to this or that epic. It may be that this conception of epic is suited perfectly to the Song of Roland or the Nibelungenlied.]

Bréal concedes that the chansons de geste might perhaps have come into being this way. But he will not grant it of the Iliad and the Odyssey. That is not because he was certain one man had written the poem.\textsuperscript{51} Rather, it was because the plasticity of the language of Homer’s épics could never be accounted for by the notion of a spontaneous collective effusion. Nor does the supposition of individual authorship in any way guarantee a Homeric standard of plasticity: the language of James MacPherson’s counterfeit Volkseikon is an example of its absence. In
short, it is not the opposition of the single mind vs. the many minds that matters here, but the suppleness of poetic practice in its attentiveness to the linguistic possibilities of the different historical moments. 

Bréal clearly distinguishes between the rhapsodic practice that permitted a mixing of dialects and diachronic forms, and the plasticity of achieved poetic language in the Homeric epics that this more general practice made possible. It is no surprise that the dialect spoken by Homer has never been discovered, Bréal writes, since the language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was not a spontaneous growth, but a made thing. Linguists troubled by the phonetic inconsistencies and the strange assortment of grammatical forms in Homer’s language had proposed that the rhapsodes must have shifted between ancient Greek dialects according to the population that they were performing for, and that in the final (written) redaction of the poem there remained traces of this “perpetual transposition.” Nevertheless, Bréal remarks,

> il faut ajouter que l’habitude de la transposition devait être ancienne, et qu’elle avait fait naître un langage mixte où les rhapsodes avaient permission de puiser les formes à leur convenance. On composait en ce dialecte mêlé qui était la langue de l’épopée. (PMCH, 21)

[we should add that the habit of transposition must have been much older [than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*], and that it created a mixed language from which the rhapsodes had permission to draw as they liked. The blended dialect in which they composed was the language of epic.]

At the time of Homer, that is, the language of epic was already a “dialecte mêlé.” Bréal likens this “langage mixte” to the hotchpotch of Catalan, Provencal, and Italian lexemes that occurs in certain troubadour lyrics of southern France. He emphasizes as well the agency of the rhapsodes: ancient custom allowed them to shift among forms at their will, while the contingent practice of such transposition over time brought into being a plasticity of compositional approach that made possible the subsequent Homeric achievement in linguistic texture.52

VII. THE LIMITS OF HOMERIC PLASTICITY: CANTO 20

The opening lines of Canto 20 set down various *trouvailles* whose verbal latencies hold in an unfading “freshness” intimations of a speaker’s devotion to his beloved:
The boughs are not more fresh
where the almond shoots
take their March green.

(C, 89)

The freshness of these poetic phrases in fact depends upon a couple
of conditions: 1) archival preservation; 2) their translation into other
signs, which includes both their susceptibility to translation, and an
actual / active translating of them by somebody. If the latter condition
is not fulfilled, any trouvaille might as well be merely a decorative
emblem (“sirens in the pillar heads” [C, 95]). If the former is not
fulfilled, the idea of lyric potency or capacity as preserved in consum-
mately achieved classical or medieval forms can be only waved at in
vain from a diachronically impoverished present.

There are many references in Canto 20 to “cut” sound. Each one
of the trouvailles gathered here exemplifies what it is to be cut in this
phonic sense. The hazard is that this collection of cut sounds will also
end up separated from historical context, from what Condillac called
the analogies of a language at a particular moment in time, and from
the sentences that can be composed and taken up in it—hence that
any given trouvaille will be a cipher about which one can only ever
wonder “what the DEFFIL” it might mean. One cannot be confident
that the evergreen 700 or 800 or 2000-year old trouvailles of Ventadorn,
Cavalcanti and Sextus Propertius, set free in this way, will ever even
be taken up and “used,” never mind that they will fully discharge or
translate their meanings.

What if these trouvailles have no necessity? What if the assertion
that they should be embedded in human consciousness cannot be
continued through? The supposedly just and durable phrases a reader
encounters through Canto 20—“e l’olor d’enoi ganres”; “nel fuoco
d’amore mi mise”; “neson anumona”; “le donne e i cavalieri”, and so
on—would then take on a synecdochic relation. But to what larger
whole? Not, or not exclusively, as in classical allusion, to an older text. The trouvaille belongs instead to the contingency of a single person’s
reading history. It becomes a sign pointing to the energetic quality of
an instance of reading. The energy is diminished, of course, where
the speaking or reading of any given word or phrase is unlikely to be
repeated by any contemporaries. The Nic Este sequence alludes in
this way to the Song of Roland.

The speaker is Êste, the Marquise of Ferrara (1384–1441 CE),
who took revenge not upon a crowd of impudent suitors, but upon his
young wife, Parisina, and his son (by another woman) Ugo Aldobran-
dino. He had them both beheaded for their adulterous union. Most of this action is represented in Pound’s sequence by way of a crazy and confused fantasy of betrayal: Este imagining himself as the hero of the *Chanson de Roland* making his last stand, lashing out at traitor and infidel assailants:

And he lay there on the round hill under the cedar
A little to the left of the cut (Este speaking)
By the side of the summit, and he said:
   “I have broken the horn, bigod, I have
   “Broke the best ivory, l’olofans.” And he said
   “Tan mare fustes!”
   pulling himself over the gravel,
   “Bigod! That buggar is done for,
   “They wont get another such ivory.”
And they were before the wall, Toro, las almenas,
(Este, Nic Este speaking)

(C, 91)

Pound thought the *Chanson* marked the end of the heroic ideal in European literature. Even from Este’s perspective, the heroic age is beyond reach. Pound would have further appreciated the dramatic irony of a proud man (Este) who apparently does not recognize the pride of the one he identifies himself with—namely Roland, “a victim, not to the treachery of Ganelon, but to that pride which forbade him to sound the horn for aid.”

Linguistically, what we notice here is a “langage mixte”: Este speaking not an Italian dialect, but an English one, interspersed with a few phrases of medieval French and Spanish. The Marquis’s monologue fictionalizes an instance of extreme emotional energy finding and intensely using a mixed form. Evidently, Este is not one of the great inventors or masters of language—he is a mediocre man, as well as a double murderer. But, as we will see, he does not resemble the lotus-eaters either, who are reduced to a purely synchronic realm and returned to a language of gesture. His monologue, in common with the canto to which it belongs, has no obvious audience. Its content is the martial legend of European nationalist epic, refracted now through Este’s Englished idioms. That larger form may be broken and confused, but his impromptu translation of the scene of Roland’s last stand, and the activity of his speaking it (“Este speaking”), sets this speech, for all its futility and craziness, in the middle range of self-conscious historicity I mention above.
Again and again Pound touches the keynote of brokenness: brokenness and confusion, the “Basis of renewals, subsistence.” What precisely is to be renewed? Not the memory of any particular beloved. Not the heroic ideal (which is finished), and not the Homeric epic (also done). What will subsist upon what? Perhaps the language of Epos, reconceived as synchronic possibility, is to subsist upon diachronic find and foldback. If so, such renewal can only be effected through Bréal’s plasticity, a quality of mind that brings to bear linguistic agency upon the historicity of use.

The _lotophagoi_ (lotus-eaters), in a sequence that comprises almost half of Canto 20, are the sailors who opted out of the Odyssean adventure while the getting was still good. These are the low-born men, who, with “quiet, scornful” but impeccable reasoning, explicitly reject the service of godlike Odysseus (_C_, 93). The opposition of Odysseus and his anonymous men is a caricatural extreme, as is that of the genius artist and the folk. A hypertrophic figure of will (Sigismundo Malatesta is another), like a wholly passive man who has forfeited all agency, can do only so much in the linguistic realm. The final two sequences of the canto represent, antithetically, the same logic of failure. The modern poet cannot go back to a time before historicity; and he moves in a synchronic realm, as do all speakers.

The _lotophagoi_, blissed-out burners of the olibanum sacred to Dionysos, move towards oblivion in an ecstasy of forgetting. They are a collectivity. Each man, though, moves alone toward death:

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Each man in his cloth, as on raft, on
The high invisible current;
On toward the fall of water

(C, 92)
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Each is lifted up on the stream of the present moment, which is “the high invisible current” of linguistic synchrony moving beyond any individual’s will. The rhythm to which they move is as compelling and as lacking in nuance as the lotus itself:

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And the blue water dusky beneath them,
pouring there into the cataract,
With noise of sea over shingle,
striking with:
  hah hah ahah thmm, thumb, ah
  woh woh araha thumm, bhaaa.

(C, 93)
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In their approach to “the cataract,” the lotus-eaters, who deny their own historicity, point mutely to that which makes linguistic transmission between the generations necessary.

Pound renders the representative lotus-eater’s somnolent, flying-carpet movement—stance: “reclining”—in verbless, third-person phrases. The lotus-eater, thus imagined, is an array of gesture:

The right arm cast back,
the right wrist for a pillow,
The left hand like a calyx,
Thumb held against finger, the third,
The first fingers petal’d up, the hand as a lamp,
A calyx.

(C, 92)

A loss of energy—deceleration, dissipation, entropy—is unmistakable. The lotus-eater’s hand makes its own calyx of “March green,” but the freshness of the gesture partakes only and fanatically of the present moment. Pound’s syntax in particular suggests that some sort of power has gone out of words and back into gesture alone. Without archive, without translation, without past or future, a langage d’action becomes purely visual or decorative (in the final sequence, “sleeves embroidered with flowers” [C, 95]). Sundry tokens of Dionysos have mostly been taken by readers of the Cantos to be eruptions of the sacred into history: here, though, the lotophagoi seem the essence of what Jacques Derrida, musing on the death drive in its relation to the archive, called the “archiviolithic,” or that which yearns to erase the archive or trace altogether—and so, in consequence, to obliterate the diachronic or the historical dimension of existence.57

From the lotus-eaters’ aquatic dreamscape, the reader follows Canto 20’s conclusion to the imagined vicinity of Sigismondo’s Tempio Malatestiano, a pagan temple of ancestor worship put up in Rimini by that fifteenth century strongman. The palace, with its syncretism of forms belonging to different ages, should be an architectural emblem of linguistic plasticity. But it is not. The closing passage figures that failure by stilling the dynamic promise of its own “langage mixte” (PMCH, 21):

The soft pad of beasts dragging the cars;
Cars, slow, without creak,
And at windows in inner roadside:
le donne e i cavalieri
smooth face under hennin
The sleeves embroidered with flowers,
Great thistle of gold, or an amaranth,
Acorns of gold, or of scarlet,
Cramoisi and diaspre
    slashed white into velvet;
Crystal columns, acanthus, sirens in the pillar heads

(C, 95)

Again, a loss of energy is palpable in image and sentence rhythm both. The funereal movement of the cars accompanies a third-person, almost heraldic arrangement of archaic phrases describing static visual designs. There are no verbs other than participles.

The passage is full of words—“hennin,” “le donne e i cavalieri,” “cramoisi and diaspre,” “acanthus”—that philology has loaned the poet; or that the poet has found and used. In what sense has he used them, though, when the ligature of this historically plausible assortment of lexemes has the flimsiness of a list? Pound had remarked (1916) about the Paradiso that “the permanent part is Imagisme, the rest, the discourses with the calendar of the saints and the discussions about the nature of the moon, are philology.” I suppose him to have meant that only the energy of poetic language can guarantee synchronic permanence. And yet, in this canto, Pound’s chosen trouvailles settle immediately into a stasis of uptake akin to the peace impotently wished by Este upon his son Borso. Such actualization, that is, lies beyond the power of the one wishing or intending or asserting. Whatever the poet meant to assert remains tied to a set of words and phrases that can stand forth only in the energeia of use. Pound meant the unfinished Tempio, we may presume, to be the emblem of a brave but misguided failure. Canto 20 confirms that it takes more than one, more than once, to make something of philology.

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NOTES

4 OED Online, s.v. “forloyn.” The OED Online gives the following example of use: “c.1369 Chaucer. Dethe Blaunche 386. Therwith the hunte wonder faste Blew a forloyn at the laste.”

Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. K. Tarnowski and F. Will (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973) 43. Adorno finds that “the jargon [of authenticity]” has a “greed for the archaic”; and that “the disproportion between language and the rationalized society motivates the authenticity to plunder language, rather than to drive it on, through greater sharpness, to its proper due” (43). He describes as well a “second objectification” of such words that “takes vengeance” on the jargon by becoming “practicable.” Pound could certainly be accused of “plundering” archaic states of language, but his interest in the archaic seems differently motivated from that of Jaspers, Heidegger and their contemporaries.

What Pound Made of Philology

William Wordsworth, in a footnote to his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), wrote: “[T]he affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day” (quoted in Wordsworth, *Translations of Chaucer and Virgil*, ed. Bruce E. Graver [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998], 10). Graver takes Wordsworth’s confidence in Chaucer’s intelligibility to be “a testament to 18th century philology and editorial scholarship, especially to the monumental work of [Thomas] Tyrwhitt” (10). Tyrwhitt, with a reliable understanding of Middle English grammar, produced an edition (1775–78) of *The Canterbury Tales* with notes and glossary. He was also the scholar who proved Thomas Chatterton’s Rowley poems to be fakes.

Hans Aarsleff, introduction to Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. and ed. Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), xviii–xiii. Many students of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy of language have been too quick to suppose that the German Romantic theorists (Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried Herder, Humboldt) superceded what were basically Enlightenment theories of language propounded by French thinkers such as Condillac and Denis Diderot. See Aarsleff’s polemic against Ernst Cassirer in his introduction to Humboldt’s *On Language: the diversity of human language structure and its influence on the mental development of mankind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), xxii–xxxvii.

Pound wrote in “The Serious Artist”: “We might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding and unifying.” He goes on to ask: “What is the difference between poetry and prose? I believe that poetry is the more highly energized” (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot [London: Faber & Faber, 1954], 49; this collection is hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *LE*). For more instances of Pound’s deployment of a metaphorics of energy, see Kenner’s *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), 146–7. Kenner’s book is hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *TPE*.

Quoted from “Notes on Elizabethan Classicists”: “I know that all classic authors have been authoritatively edited and printed by Teubner, and their wording ultimately settled at Leipzig, but all questions concerning ‘the classics’ are not definitely settled, cold-storaged, and shelved” (*LE*, 40). Pound’s quarrel with Germanic philology is a leitmotif in *The Spirit of Romance*, *Literary Essays*, and later prose works as well. If we look at his invective more closely, though, we can see that Pound’s early animus...
was against scholarship, not necessarily German, that made no effort at discernment—
the critical labor of discerning the relative merit of historically comparable works or
bodies of work.


2006), 1048a–1048b.

14 Notoriously, scribes and exegetes since at least ancient Roman times have been
confusing energeia (whose root is ergon, “work”) and enargeia (whose root is arg-, “a
shining forth”). The first use of “energy” recorded by the OED Online, from Sidney’s
Defense of Poesie, falls somewhere between these semantic possibilities, perhaps the
result of a misunderstanding of a passage in Aristotle’s Rhetoric: “That same forcible-
ness, or Energia, (as the Greekes cal it) of the writer.”

15 See Humboldt, On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction
and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species, ed. Michael


17 To give only a few examples: “Dr. Johnson . . . supposed that words denoted
things. A language is simply an assortment of words, and a set of rules for combin-
ing them”; “[the intellectual achievement and characterizing paradigm] of the 18th
century is System”; “The Imagist recall of poetic diction to speech was more profound
than Wordsworth’s, because speech in 1913 was better understood; Wordsworth had
simply thought rural diction ‘pure’ by nearly Augustan canons” (TPE, 123; 126; 128).

18 See Aarsleff, From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intel-
lectual History (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), 33–37. Hereafter cited
parenthetically by page number and abbreviated LTS.

19 Though not explicitly directed to Kenner, Aarsleff’s warning is worth repeating:
“‘Etymology’ is one of the trickiest words of all, both philosophically and philologically,
and nineteenth-century pride in its own accomplishments in that department should
not deceive us” (LTS, 83).

20 The appearance of words derived from dunamis or energeia—mixed with twentieth
century scientific “energy” metaphors—in a number of of Kenner’s formulations suggests
that it is difficult even to approach the question of usage without these Aristotelian terms
and their cognates: “a structure of words, where the words exchange dynamisms in the
ecology of language” (TPE, 126); “writing is largely quotation, quotation newly energized,
as a cyclotron augments the energies of common particles circulating” (TPE, 126).

21 See Aarsleff, The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860. In From Locke to
Saussure, see particularly “Bréal vs. Schleicher: Reorientation in Linguistics during
the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century,” 293–334; and “Bréal, ‘la sémantique,’
and Saussure,” 382–398.

22 Marjorie Perloff, who has probably done the most to popularize the term (and
oppose it polemically to “lyric”), defines “collage” this way: “the setting side by side or
juxtaposition of disparate materials without commitment to explicit syntactical relations
between elements. In a collage-text like Pound’s Canto IX, such normal syntactical rela-
tions as subordination or implication are suppressed in favor of relations of similarity,
equivalence, or identity; thus the last thirteen lines of the Canto juxtapose a passage
from the Commentaries of Pius II . . . with bits from Horace, Walter Savage Landor,
modern shorthand . . . , and travel-book narrative, without subordinating one element
to another, so that the reader must puzzle out their various values and connections”
I think collage is a less than satisfactory critical term exactly because it takes as non-problematic the different dimensions of linguistic finding and using that I discuss here.


30 Condillac, 190.

31 Condillac, 194.


33 Quoted in Aarsleff, introduction to Condillac’s *Essay*, lvi–lvii.

34 Diderot, *Oeuvres*, 1:374; my translation.


36 Pound, in various texts, singles out the following line of Homer for its “magnificent onomatopoeia, as of the rush of the waves on the sea-beach and recession in: / παρά θίνα πολυφλοίσβοιο θάλάσσῃ/ untranslated and untranslatable” (*LE*, 250).


40 In Canto 95 (published 1955), Pound rendered the Ventadorn *trouvaille* as follows: “And if I see her not / No sight is worth the beauty of my thought” (C, 665).


42 Julie C. Hayes, in *Reading the French Enlightenment: System and Subversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), argues that “Diderot’s interpellation, through a
variety of techniques, of a reader or partner in dialogue calls forth and gives form to an active, thinking interlocutor . . . to the production of the enlightened reader” (145).

43 “Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language, just as a painter must have pigments or shades more numerous than the existing names of the colours” (Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* [New York: New Directions, 1970 (1916)], 87–88).


45 We do not have many examples of the use of *sagetrieb* in actual sentences; and the 1957 letter cited by Froula is not well known. Pound’s coined, non-morphologically correct German word has taken on the hazy quality of a *hapax legomenon*. Walter Baumann supposes the term to derive in some way from Leo Frobenius’s writings, and notes that Pound in one essay explicitly sets the *Kulturmorpolie* of Frobenius against the work of nineteenth century philology, which (in Pound’s words) relegated “everything to separate compartments” (quoted in *Roses from the Steel Dust: Collected Essays on Ezra Pound* [Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2000], 147). Baumann argues, then, that “sagetrieb” for Pound was synonymous with “paideuma”; and that it names “the force he perceived behind all cultural phenomena” (152).

The founding editors of the journal *Sagetrieb* note that the word’s compounds are “to tell” and “life force.” Guided by the authority of the mid-twentieth century scholar Achilles Fang, they understand the word to make the best sense in a Confucian context. The eponymous journal’s editors suppose that *sagetrieb*, intimately linked for Pound to the Chinese character Chiao (“to teach”), names a process: “to perfect a humane tradition in music and poetry gleaned from the past, and pass it on to the future.”

Perloff, following M. A. Bernstein, takes *sagetrieb* to be a telling of the tribe (rather than of the individual), and quickly incorporates it in this sense into her own polemic: “Again *sagetrieb*, as Pound, borrowing the term from Leo Frobenius, called it (*trieb* = drive; *sage* = tale or fable, hence the drive or urge to tell the tale, to speak the fable) inevitably involves a departure from the lyric voice” (182).

46 Quoted in Froula, 145–6. This passage appears in an unpublished letter to Lewis Maverick (2 September 1957).


48 Condillac, 187.


50 Pound, like Bréal, mocked Herder and Schlegel-inspired theories of *Volksepik*, and in *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968) took issue especially with Paris’s celebration of a depersonalized style expressive of “national destiny”: “what Paris terms the ‘national style’ . . . is likely to seem a rather wooden convention to an outlander. The personality of the author is said to be ‘suppressed,’ although it might be more exact to say that it has been worn away by continuous oral transmission. . . . Paris notes [the] feeling of national destiny, the love of la douce France, and the love of the national honor, as the three qualities which give the poem its ‘grandiose character.’ But we, who have not had our literary interest in the poem stimulated of late by the Franco-Prussian war and the feelings of outraged patriotism attendant thereupon, notice a certain tedious redundance before being charmed by this ‘caractère grandiose’” (74–75).

J. Mark Smith
Even in his old age, Pound is reported to have held tenaciously to the view that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were composed by one man (rather than by generations of bards). Kenner, in “Pound and Homer,” records that “when Pound, aged eighty-four, heard an exposition of [the oral-formulaic hypothesis], he responded that it did not explain ‘why Homer is so much better than everybody else’” (*Ezra Pound Among The Poets*, ed. George Bernstein, [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985], 11).

Bréal gave serious consideration to the question of the social context in which the matter of the *Iliad* was brought to its final, most consummately achieved poetic form. He concluded it must have been performed at one of the major religious festivals. Unlike Pound, Bréal was willing to entertain the possibility that a fraternity of poets—albeit one guided by “une pensée directrice [a lead intelligence]”—worked to produce the great poem for a specific occasion: “l’auteur peut fort bien être un groupe organisé, une confrérie ayant sa règle, ses traditions, et—ce qui n’importe pas moins—poursuivant un but d’utilité immédiate et ayant sa function reconnue [the author could well have been an organized group, a fraternity that had its own code and traditions and—equally important—that pursued a goal of immediate utility and recognized social function]” (*PMCH*, 112–113).

Alexander Pope, no poor philologist himself, was aware of Homer’s disparate borrowings from different dialects, and in the preface to his translation of the *Iliad* set forth an interpretation of what motivated those borrowings: “[Homer] was not satisfied with his language as he found it settled in any one part of Greece but searched through its different dialects with this particular view, to beautify and perfect his numbers: he considered these as they had a greater mixture of vowels or consonants, and accordingly employed them as the verse required either a greater smoothness or strength” (“Pope’s Preface” [1715], *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. A. Pope, ed. John Selby Watson (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), xxxi). Pope and Bréal both assume strong authorial agency with respect to usage; but Bréal’s conception of Homeric plasticity assumes the author or authors worked with a language that was never not blended and marked by historical and geographical contingencies.

In “Hell” (first published April 1934), Pound tells a story of “Yeats wanting me to speak some verse aloud in the old out-of-door Greek theatre at Siracusa.” Pound says he spoke a line of ancient Greek—“refused to spout English poesy. I don’t know how far I succeeded in convincing him that English verse wasn’t CUT” (*LE*, 205).

Christopher Ricks, in an essay on Dryden and Pope in *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), defines allusion as “a way of dealing with the predicaments and responsibilities of ‘the poet as heir’” (9).


A Dionysian collective, it is strongly suggested. But also they are linked by a *trouvaile* from John of the Cross to the fervors of monotheistic religion.
