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Construction of an Artistic Self: Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska's Poetry Notebooks and Journal

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on journal passages and verses from Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska's poetry notebooks that demonstrate her drive to construct an artistic self. Although her artistic ambitions were long central to her idealisation of aesthetic values, she faced patriarchal prejudices, poverty, and psychological challenges in her efforts to achieve artistic recognition. Both she and her much younger and much lauded partner, sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, adopted a transgressive posture towards what they regarded as the corrupt bourgeois conventions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European and British society. Their joint development of an artistic project foregrounding primordial and transcendent forces is reflected in his letters with reference to their conversations and her letters (not extant). After Henri's tragic death fighting in northern France (June 1915), Sophie continues to reflect on that project in her journal and in her earlier poems and creation of new works, both constantly revised. For Sophie, her artistic self is realised through her invocation of Henri's continuing presence in her journal and poetry that reflect her experiences and anguish. While her life ended in obscurity, and madness, her remarkable artistic achievements can be reconstituted from the debris of her diaries and poetry notebooks.

KEYWORDS

Selfhood; artist; rebel; idealist

Introduction

This study focuses on journal passages and verses from Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska's poetry notebooks that demonstrate her drive to construct an artistic self. Sophie's concept of artistic selfhood was founded on her resistance to socio-economic and political structures. For Sophie, such structures blocked the connection of the self to the ideal, a world beyond the artificial where primordial forces inform the truth of the artistic work. Both Sophie and her partner, sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, understood such forces to be fundamentally anarchic and transgressive. Resistance does not produce logic and order but disturbance and paradox. When Sophie Brzeska uses verse to denounce bourgeois venality and corruption, the meaninglessness of everyday life, the conventions of marriage, and social interactions, she is asserting an artistic presence in the world in terms that reject that world. The artistic mission of this hyper-sensitive, largely self-educated, and impoverished woman can be reconstituted from the paradoxical debris of her life as registered in her diaries and notebooks.

Born in 1872 to impoverished nobility living in the Galician countryside of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire, Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska died in 1925 at Coney Hill Asylum, Gloucestershire, near the picturesque southern Cotswold village of Wotton-Under-Edge.¹ Obsessed by achieving selfhood as an innovative literary artist, she left hundreds of pages of journal writings in French, along with many loose pages in Polish and English. She also left 14 small notebooks evoking her sufferings, her rage, and resistance amid occasional celebrations of her natural surroundings and ideals. One of the few points of order in her archive is a series of notebooks filled with poems, three of them labelled in Roman numerals, I, II, III. These numbered poetry notebooks feature crossings-out and revisions that indicate artistic intentionality. Months, years, and even days ascribed to poems evidently still under review make any attempt at dating them

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approximate. What the texts convey are intermittent evocations of experiences in a chaotic and intensely painful life vowed to artistic expression. The papers and notebooks arrived via a circuitous route at Special Collections, Albert Sloman Library of the University of Essex. This collection has been studied piecemeal, but its dispersedness—mirroring the agonised chaos of Sophie’s life—in addition to its multilingual character and the physical damage that it has sustained, has so far resisted attempts at rigorous organisation.

Sophie’s mother was known for her voracious reading. For all that, she tried to marry her daughter off, conventionally assuming that education was limited to her sons. To escape the oppressive attitudes of her family which threatened her educational and artistic ambitions, Sophie would lead a peripatetic life as a governess in America and England, and again as a casual worker in Paris, where she met her romantic and artistic partner, Henri Gaudier. She was always emotional and was perceived as ethnically different in ways that contravened her aspirations (Ready 2023, 129–141). While that discord brought her suffering, her anger and pain also energised her to resist erasure by writing her journal and distilling that journal’s reflection of artistic longings into her poetry notebooks. This study aims to recognize Sophie’s artistic achievements in her life, which eventually appears to have descended into the very madness she had feared after the shock of Henri’s early death in war. Instead of order and progress towards goals and realised accomplishments, there are only fragments. They call out for empathetic witnesses to shattered aspirations. As much as a collapse into chaos, meaninglessness, and obscurity, her diaristic impulse reaches towards the possibility of artistic achievement. If remarkable diaries are often initiated and achieved as narratives of imprisonment, Sophie’s diary and diaristic poems are the pieces of a multi-dimensional cell from which she could constantly write without ever finding release into an artistic presence in the world.

The archive

Special Collections at the Albert Sloman Library houses two closely related collections in the Gaudier-Brzeska Archive.² That of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915), a gifted and innovative young French artist and sculptor who was killed in action, northern France, June 1915, is comprised of some 30 letters, postcards, and drawings. Many are dated on consecutive days and occasionally at multiple points in a day. Most are addressed to his considerably older Polish partner (1872–1925), Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska. The intensity of their relationship is signalled by their adoption of each other’s last names. If not technically recognised as diaristic, Henri’s items have been edited, studied, translated, and reviewed in numerous publications, over nearly 100 years, most recently in the catalogue of a 2009 exhibition in Paris to which curator Doïna Lemny appended a selected edition.³ The bulk of Henri’s aesthetic thinking is articulated in his postcards and letters to Sophie about his artistic experiences and thoughts, often in reference to their conversations.⁴ According to initial Gaudier-Brzeska curator and collector Jim Ede, the relationship between Henri and Sophie was fundamentally diaristic. It began when Henri gave her his diary and she read that they shared the same attitudes and aesthetic values (Ede 1971, 16). Sophie’s own chaotic archive is contained in two large ‘green frogmouth, cloth bound’ boxes. The first is ‘Creative Writings’.⁵ But the second, containing her ‘notebooks, thoughts, ideas and impressions from as early as 1909 ... not to be confused with the diary’⁶, is a key element in Sophie’s continued response to the arguments about artistic selfhood found in Henri’s letters and cards. The dispersive contents of the second large box suggest a kaleidoscopic testimony to Sophie’s struggle to realise herself as an artist by invoking Henri’s image—his strong hands, penetrating eyes, and handsome body—and their shared concepts, conflicts and experiences.

The three poetry notebooks that are referenced in this study are about 100 pages each, numbered I, II, III in Sophie’s hand.⁷ Another such notebook of poems seems ‘ritualised’ by invocations to God, but that divinity may be a mixture of Christian God and the Sun god frequently invoked by Henri and Sophie as they convene primordial forces to their artistic expression.⁸ Indeed, Sophie frequently draws small, radiating suns next to the titles of her poems, which often invoke the sun, moon, water, and nature, in order to realise her relationship to the primordial that Henri asserted in his work and writing. Four other such small notebooks contain miscellaneous writings in French and Polish. Two of them include dreams and diary passages in French and Polish.⁹ Two other notebooks contain poems and additional copies of poems in the numbered notebooks.¹⁰ There are three undated notebooks of various literary notes in Polish and French, perhaps reflecting women’s classes undertaken by Sophie at the Sorbonne. Another would seem connected to

the study materials, 'Pensées de Bronze et d'acier' ('Thoughts of Bronze and Steel').¹¹ In addition, there are over 100 fragile loose sheets in French and Polish.

A separate grouping in the archive features three large box files enclosing over 800 pages of diaries, written largely in French. These box files are divided by years: 1915–19, 1920–1921, January 1922 to October 1922.¹² The diary box reference for this study is 'Sophie Brzeska, Diary, October 1915–1919'.¹³ None of these contents have been organised, transcribed, and translated in any rigorous way, nor does their condition lend them to standard archival procedures. Many pages of the later years are obscured by water damage, ground-in dirt, and dust and ink seepage, all of which often makes their contents inaccessible. Even in the carefully copied-out trilogy of poetry notebooks and in the additional notebook ritually marked by dedicatory material to divine forces, Sophie's handwriting, corrections, crossings-out, and spacing pose difficulties for deciphering and accurately transcribing the texts that she apparently intended for potential readership and publication (Henderson 2019, 26–30). Study of extensive passages of the French diary segments that can be read and transcribed suggests that their relationship to time is loosely connected to evocations of life experience and memory linked to philosophical and political debates. Blank spaces, frequent corrections, and crossings-out bear witness to Sophie's intention that the diary attest an intellectual growth subjected to constant revision. The debates featured often rehearse the terms of those in Henri's letters: Nietzsche, the London avant-garde community, and her artistic expression.¹⁴ For example, the pages of Box 1915–19 are addressed to Henri, 'À Ta Très Chère Mémoire (Suite Finale)' [To Your Very Dear Memory (Final Series)]. At times, the pages are dated by day and month. There is no initial series, but the memorial dedication and musical implications of 'Suite Finale' suggest that the writing pulses through her experiences with him, inscribing Henri's continued presence in her expressive activity. Sophie's own role in forging that intellectual bond is emphasised by Catherine Chevillot when she notes that Sophie probably introduced Henri to the influential and innovative Polish artistic community at the Café Cujas near the Sorbonne.¹⁵ Sophie's diary is then a space for that shared artistic vision to continue. It is a space for their mutual commitment to the dynamics of resistance and revolt to perdure via her own artistic performance.

Henri and Sophie: rage, anarchy, and twentieth-century diary writing

The rage that features in Sophie's writing characterises women's diaries in the twentieth century. Nicola Shulman asserts: 'A really striking feature is the collapse of quality in the last quarter of the twentieth century ... Women's diary-writing flourished at times when their rage against social conditions was, ... a secret but not a crime'.¹⁶ For both Sophie and Henri, angry resistance is symbolised by the sun. In 1911, Henri writes to Sophie about the death of an anarchist artist from the effects of imprisonment, 'pray to the beautiful sun for Delannoy' (Antliff 2010, 135–169, 151). Sophie blended invocations to the sun 'Grand Soleil! / ... J'ai foi En toi, [Great Sun, I have faith in you], 'Beau Soleil' [Beautiful Sun],¹⁷ 'Le Soleil/ Qui est le Père des dieux' [The Sun/Who is the Father of the gods], with invocations of Henri as 'beau Soleil/ ... Je me pare en jeune mariée [handsome sun ... I adorn myself like a young bride]'.¹⁸ Sophie also merges the cult of the primordial with Christian references to the sacred apostles, the crucifixion, and the glorification of God.¹⁹

The memorial structure of Sophie's diary is infused with the energy of their conflicts. At one point, she makes him live again when she remembers how his rebuke 'struck her eyes', making her see the contrast between her belief in her talent and the absence of its realisation in literary work.

Mon pauv'chéri je pense aux moments de nos dissensions ou par une malice espiègle ou convaincue_ Tu me jetais aux yeux [avec/inserted] le reproche de n'avoir encore rien produit-le doute en mon talent_ ... blessée au moral je ne fais que continuer cette existence intenable ... Me voila embourbée dans les ennuies_dans l'incertitude et qui pis est dans l'indignation contre les porcs humains ... Que ne prends Tu la force d'une Furie pour semer le feu et toutes les calamités possibles sur sur ces scélérats féroces_ces 'monstres de respectabilité'.²⁰

[My poor darling, I think of our quarrelsome moments, where out of mischievous or decided malice_You tossed at my very eyes the reproach that I had not yet produced anything—your doubt in my talent_ ... wounded in spirit I just go on with this unbearable existence ... Here I am bogged down in worries_in uncertainty and what is even worse in my outrage against the human pigs ... Why don't you take the force of a Fury to sow fire and all possible calamities on these savage villains_these 'monsters of respectability'].

If her wounds remain fresh in a hostile and unstable world, she asserts herself through the energy of her rage against the porcine bourgeoisie. But that rage remains within the diary unless animated by Henri's daemonic power, activated only in the extravagance of her words. She remembers their dispute, she asks why he does not use his rage, but neither he nor anyone hears her outside the nonetheless living pages of her diary.

In volume I of her poetry notebooks, she echoes the pain and damage of their disagreements in 'Notre malentendu fut notre malheur' [Our misunderstanding was our misfortune]: 'Toujours prêt et enclin/À délaissier ma cause/Pour garantir la tienne/Tu cours la griffe au diable' [Always ready and prepared/to abandon my own view/to support your own/You run hooks like a devil's claw].²¹ In the 'ritualised' notebook, introduced by diverse invocations to Henri and divine forces, Sophie's poem on the spectacle of fire, 'Feu' [Fire]—'Je regarde le feu/et vois cent mirages ... /un spectacle trop grand pour mon art poétique [I look at the fire/and see a hundred visions ... /a sight beyond my poetic art]—is immediately followed by an address to Henri's fiery spirit, 'Au Feu Novembre 1916' ['To Fire November 1916'], 'Feu chériPrends/Mènes-Moi/Vers l'esprit/De mon Gars/Mon "Petit"' [Darling Fire ... Take/Lead Me/To the spirit/of my Guy/My 'Little one'].²² Again, he is her child but also a fiery force that is beyond human dimension and her own art to make present.

The reflections, invocations, and arguments in the conceptually focused diary furnish resources and at times prose drafts for the poems. As such, the diary and diaristic poems work together to construct a selfhood intended for display. Sophie's compulsive writing strives to release the diary and poems from socio-economic repression into the recognition of artistic merit and achievement.²³ But the artistic persona validated by the poems remains submerged in the collision of doubt, despair, fear, and rage. Through the denunciation and ridicule of bourgeois values and identity structures, Sophie realises the artistic project and identity which Henri and his fellow artists in Paris created to resist those conventions.²⁴ As a place of memory and recording then, Sophie's diary is a platform for action.

What kind of artistic persona?: The *Maudit* (Shunned)

The emphasis on resistance to aesthetic and social norms and their oppressive consequences goes beyond the rage that Nicola Shulman argues is a fundamental impetus to diary writing for women in the early twentieth century. The Parisian background and activities of Sophie and Henri indicate that Sophie's writing is both a witness to and a construction of a particular kind of identity which they shared and performed: that of the French Romantic tradition of the *maudit* or shunned, characterised in the influential 1883 book by Paul Verlaine, *Les Poètes maudits* [The Shunned Poets].²⁵ The *maudit* is the outsider, often peripatetic, who suffers and resists the corruption of human society and condition through artistic expression, often rendered minimally present through socio-economic oppression and existential fragility. Rather than conform to the conventions of artistic taste and commercialisation, the *maudit* artist often produces little or accepts the consequences of financial and critical failure. The *maudit* is famously exemplified in the scandalous writings and agonised life of Baudelaire (Schlesser 2024, 9–11; Steinmetz 2020, 107–129). His persona and work are frequent references for Henri and Sophie.

The *maudit* identity resonates with Henri's participation in the anarchism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture of resistance rooted in the bitter aftermath of the Paris Commune.²⁶ Apparently following on Henri's death, Sophie wrote a poem, in what became volume II of her poetic diary, which attests to her artistic context in the *maudit*/shunned tradition:

[Août 1915] 'Hommage à mes maîtres préférés' [Tribute to my Chosen Teachers] ... 'Prenez le gouvernail de ma barque tournante/que votre grand Esprit sauve le mien du trépas/guidez le vers votre centre -Ô maîtres vénérés/Corbière_ Baudelaire_ Haraucourt_Rollinat_!'²⁷

[Take the tiller of my circling barque/may your great spirit save mine from death/guide it towards your center-point—O worshipping masters, Corbière_ Baudelaire_ Haraucourt_Rollinat]

In the imagery of a boat adrift seeking a steersman, there is an echo of seventeen-year-old *maudit* poet Arthur Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre', which hurtles endlessly through exotic worlds.²⁸ But in place of Rimbaud's defiant breaking of poetic conventions, there is a sacral tone in Sophie's call to save her from the deadly eddies of a mind adrift by guiding her into the patterned centre of their poetic style. Rimbaud is

not listed among Sophie's poetic masters, perhaps because of how Sophie's idealised relationship with the much younger Henri might appear in the light of Rimbaud's scandalous love affair with the older *maudit* Verlaine. The transgressive and eccentric Breton poet Tristan Corbière (1845–75) is listed, however. His poems also feature the language of the sea and seafarers, as do those of Baudelaire in his 1857 collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* [*Flowers of Evil*], e.g. 'L'Homme et la Mer' [The Man and the Sea], 'Un Voyage à Cythère' [A Voyage to Cythera].²⁹ That Sophie knew and loved the Breton coast in her sojourns at Royan perhaps enhanced her identification with Corbière (1845–75), little known except through his single book of agonised poetry, *Les Amours Jaunes* [Yellow Loves], product of a sickly life and an early death.³⁰ This brings us to the final two names on the list. Edmond Haraucourt (1856–1941) was reputed as a poet for his bitterness and melancholy, thus *maudit* tonality, as was Maurice Rollinat (1846–1903).³¹

The damage and obscurity of Sophie's archive actualise the *maudit* themes of oppression, isolation, and failed artistic acknowledgment. They also raise questions about how the writings and aspirations of intellectual women are treated—and in particular how Polish women were treated with disdain in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France and England. But the sheer amplitude of the diary asserts its importance to Sophie's struggle to realise her genius in response to Henri's confidence in his own talent and aesthetic ideas. The grief, desolation, fear, and rage sown through the prose and poetry of her intellectual, social, and political critique indicate that its driving force is the paradox of identity construction through resistance. Much as such passions are recognised motivations in diary making³², Sophie's primary motive is the construction and assertion of a *maudit* artistic self.³³ The many conflictual layers amid which the writer struggles to emerge into this aesthetic presence are indicated by the outline of her biographical details and her own references to formative experiences.

Sophie's life and the construction of an artistic self

Although various elements of her life are referenced in publications about her partner modernist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Sophie's complex trajectory is reimagined in photographs and articulated by Ania Ready's recent book, *I Also Fight Windmills* (Ready 2023). The title cites Sophie's reference to *Don Quixote* to express the combative stance so fundamental to her identity as a *maudit* artist who rejects bourgeois attitudes, roles, and conventions. Don Quixote and windmills are also featured among the writings that comprise the poetic panel of Sophie's diary, as in the poem 'Elle-même' [She Herself]: 'Drôle de compillage/Ma nature_/ ... Moitié folle_quasi sage_/ ... /Acivilization outré L'esprit Maori/ ... De "donquichoterie" Polonaise' [Clownish combination/My nature/ ... Half mad_half wise_/Without civilisation outlandish Maori mind/ ... From the Polish strain of Don Quixote].³⁴ Sophie deploys this iconic construct to express her experience of moving through incongruent spatial and emotional frameworks in 'Le Moulin à Vent Octobre 1914' [The Windmill October 1914], written apparently prior to Henri's death in June 1915:

A un an et demi j'ai quitté ma première patrie/J'en suis partie_ en Lithuanie

A seize de mes ans frémissent les bon temps/Car ma tan-tan au coeur simple et franc/S'en va de ce monde_la pauvre moribonde_/En mauvais paquet_on m'a expédiée.³⁵

[At one and a half years old, I left my first country/I went out to Lithuania/In my sixteenth year the good times shook/For my pulse beat in a simple and open heart/Poor girl half dead went out of this world/Packed up sent out in bad shape].

That hers is a conflictual experience is again characteristic of the *maudit*/shunned artistic dynamic, both rejected and rejecting.

In seeking employment, Sophie promoted her language skills in French, German, and English, gleaned from a book-keeping course in studies open to women in 1897 at a university in Lviv—then an important site of cultural and political ferment in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. An English-speaking cousin in Lviv, along with language tutelage picked up during her later governess posts, reinforced her abilities. German was commonly read and spoken in her native Galicia. Since Sophie had an imperial passport, she improved her chances for work by identifying herself as an Austrian in an effort to evade anti-Polish stereotypes.³⁶

Arriving in Paris around 1899 for a first stay until 1900/early 1901, she found accommodation in a hostel for German women domestic workers on the Rue Nollet in working-class Batignolles. After several years

working as a governess and language tutor in French and German for wealthy families on the East Coast of America, Sophie returned to Paris in 1910 to live on the Rue Cujas, near the Sorbonne University, where she studied humanities and language courses offered for women and followed the distinguished Romain Rolland's lectures on music (Ready 2023, 135). Another magnet for Sophie was the generous public access at the nearby Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève. A Polish intellectual and artistic circle based at the Café Cujas and in Montparnasse offered the social life that she craved after years of childcare and bourgeois attitudes repugnant to her.³⁷ This context was enhanced by her connection to her maternal uncle living in Paris, Emil Witski, who printed medical treatises and engaged with important Polish collectors such as Casimir de Woznicki.³⁸ Amid this more congenial milieu, she began to realise her identity as an intellectual and later an artist.

Through mutual interest in German books at the Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève, Sophie encountered in May 1910 a much younger artist of anarchist bent, Henri Gaudier, who shared her feelings of just having begun to realise an artistic identity (Ede 1971, 12–27; cf. O'Keefe, 2004). Rejected by an apparently unloving family not unlike Sophie's³⁹, Henri had arrived in Paris from his native Orléans after his own peripatetics through grants, jobs, and languages in England and Germany (Ede 1971, 12–14, 28–29; Ready 2023, 135–136). As this encounter opened out into shared aesthetic passions, Sophie's unrealised aspirations fused into an often explosive mother-son relationship with the much younger artist. Henri called her Matka, Mamuś, Mamusin and other Polish permutations of Mother but also Sappho. Sophie called him Pik, an abbreviation for what is now understood as a racially offensive term for a small African American child, perhaps for Henri's curly hair and skin, often darkened from his artistic practice. Like Henri, she used other diminutive forms of Pik—often skewed into Polish—but also frequently refers to him in French slang as her 'Gars' [Guy] or 'Petit Gars' [Little Guy] (Ede 1971, 35–42, 133). Sophie continued to use 'Gars' or 'Petit Gars' and 'Chéri' [Darling] in the later diary and diaristic poems long after his death as a way to convene those conversations into a shared artistic presence. For example, in her Poetry Notebook II poem 'Invocation', dated '8.VIII.1915', apparently just after Henri's death in June 1915, she begins 'Dieu! Rends-moi ma foi/rends mon p'tit gars' [God, give me back my faith/give me back my little guy], to continue 'Dieu! Console-moi!/Rends ma religion/De parfait union/Avec Lui et Toi' [God! Comfort me!/Make my religion/That of perfect union/With Him and You].⁴⁰

Henri learned Polish and fostered improvement in her French as they became Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska. Although English curator and collector Jim Ede (Freeman 2023, 113) was the initial promoter of both Henri and Sophie and the subsequent conservator of Sophie's diaries and writings, Laura Freeman's recent book on Ede repeats past derogatory remarks about Sophie in their avant-garde English social context, e.g. 'the Slav bore', and that the Gaudier-Brzeska name was merely to normalise joint living arrangements. After Henri's death in 1915, and continuing through Ede's *Savage Messiah* (1931), where his idiomatic English translation of letters comprises most of the text, Henri's artistic friends and art critics became fascinated by the aesthetic energies released through their enigmatic relationship.⁴¹ Where comments such as 'Abelard and Heloise' indicated that critics saw the mutual power—and tragedy—of their relationship⁴², other critics saw the conflictual dynamics more in terms of the effect on Henri: 'Clive Bell was repelled but impressed: "My God what a woman." Stanley Casson, in the *Listener* had the measure of Henri and Sophie: "Him she tortured, worried, bullied, irritated, but, in some curious way, inspired"'. Following along these lines, Ede's book resulted in a failed but now highly regarded Ken Russell film, *Savage Messiah* (1972)⁴³, based on Ede's translation and contextualisation of the letters. Although Ede titled an essay about Sophie 'An Odd woman'⁴⁴, he struggled to express how her volatility and intensity participated in the realisation of a joint artistic identity.⁴⁵

Sophie and Henri: the artistic self in diaristic letters, diary, and poems

In Henri's letters, we see what drives the constant invocation of Henri's presence in Sophie's effort to construct an artistic self in her prose dairy and in the poetry notebooks. A letter from Henri dated 13 May 1911 emphasises that they share the same eyes:

Maman bien-aimée ... si la Mamuś considère son Pik comme une partie d'elle-même, elle ne parlera plus d'"entretenir" (comme s'il s'agissait de deux personnes différentes ... il s'agit d'art et je suis Pikuś ... Tu as trouvé juste pour les yeux, c'est-à-dire pour nos yeux. Tous les gens de France m'ont fait la remarque, la mère en particulier.

‘Pourquoi regardes-tu pas comme tout le monde. Tu as les yeux d’un méchant fou, on croirait que tu veux voler quelque chose, etc., etc.’ Mais certainement je veux voler et c’est l’âme que je veux emporter.⁴⁶

[Well beloved Mama, ... if Mamus thinks that her Pik is part of herself, she won’t talk any more about being ‘kept’ (as if it’s about two different people) ... it’s about art and I am Pikuś ... you are right about the eyes, that is to say for our eyes. Everyone in France has told me, especially mother ‘Why don’t you look at things like everyone else. You have the eyes of a wicked madman, one could think that you want to steal something, etc., etc.’ But of course I want to steal and it’s the soul that I want to run off with.]

Henri quickly dismisses her reference to his dominance in their relationship by asserting their mutual selfhood and agreeing that they share the same eyes. But in separating himself in terms of art, Henri evokes the demonic and transgressive power of his eyes in terms specific to himself. Indeed that destructive visual intensity is what Sophie seeks to convoke as the artistic power necessary to realise her own artistic performance. In Sophie’s diary, ‘À Ta Très Chère Mémoire’ (Suite Finale 15), she emphasises the constant presence of his eyes in her writing:

OO Tes yeux_Tes yeux Chéri__C’est de Tes yeux que je m’envie surtout-ce sont eux qui me manque le plus dans ma vie solitaire et désolée

Partout ils me suivent et je les vois constamment attachés sur moi, Tes beaux yeux si brillants d’esprit—si pétillants de feu_si doux et malins a la fois_Ils reflétaient si bien ta belle ame généreuse de vraie artiste_ambassadeur de Dieu⁴⁷

[Ooh Your eyes_Your eyes Darling—it’s Your eyes that I want especially—it’s those

eyes that I miss the most in my solitary and desolated life. They follow me everywhere and I see them constantly riveted to me. Your handsome eyes so brilliant in spirit—so sparkling with fire_so sweet and mischievous at the same time_They reflect so well your generous soul of a true artist_God’s envoy]

Where Henri’s letter then engages with their discussions on art and beauty, accompanied by illustrations of Henri’s thoughts on neoimpressionism and realism, the development of his own artistic selfhood becomes for Sophie the vision of an artistic presence always out of reach, however often she convoked it.

In a subsequent letter, 19 May 1911 Henri writes of their relationship in terms of a ‘télépathie’ which they must exploit, ‘en profitons’, together:

Je suis un gars trop nerveux, trop de caractère et allures d’une fille & il faut que Mamus me gronde souvent. Mais vois-tu, petite Matka, c’est l’idée fixe d’art ... je vais me maintenir très tranquille aujourd’hui, demain et Dimanche car puisqu’il y a télépathie il faut être vraisemblable n’est ce pas mauvais nous en profitons souvent et dans les mauvaises choses[sic]’ ...

[I am a boy too high-strung, too stubborn and look girly & Mamus has to scold me often. But you see, little mother, that’s the obsession with art ... I’m going to be very quiet today, tomorrow and Sunday because since there is telepathy one must be realistic it’s not so bad that we often profit from it and in the bad things]

Henri’s previous emphasis on their shared eyes is now reinforced by his reference to the healing effect of their telepathic relationship. But the obsession with art is located in him while Sophie’s formative work is limited to the maternal. However, Sophie seems to have understood their convergent relationship in terms of her own artistic empowerment.

The innovative feverishness that initially drew them together is attested by Catherine Flynn in her recent study, *James Joyce and the Matter of Paris*.⁴⁸ Flynn argues that the four months in 1902 which Joyce spent reading at the Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève founded his own artistic project.⁴⁹ Like Henri and Sophie a few years later, Joyce (Flynn tells us) conceptualised ‘new modes of writing that reject fundamental categories of art’.⁵⁰ Henri and Sophie too placed themselves in the excitement of innovative currents flowing through Paris.⁵¹ In Henri’s letters, we see the ways in which his artistic thought proceeded by incorporating Sophie into his art and its subsequent materialisation of her in the images that he created. This also comes through in the pages of the diaries and poems that Sophie obsessively wrote. As we see from Henri’s letter of 13 May 1911, what Flynn identifies as Joyce’s Parisian understanding of a new artistic sensibility convening corporeal and material modalities resonates with Henri’s own insistence on the sensual and ‘palpable’ in art. Like Joyce, Henri sees shapes and imagery as formal

propositions through which new art can move into being.⁵² He urges that convergence on Sophie in order to give force to her artistic expression.

In his evening letter of 19 May 1911 cited below, Henri acknowledges Sophie's insistence that an artwork be infused with a life that has been lived. Here she takes an aesthetic leadership—extending to a critique of his presumptuous attitude—that is later realised in the diaristic form of her dialogic and experiential poetry. Sophie takes the path of realism that Henri saw as natural to her:

D'accord, Mamuś, parfaitement d'accord, tant que le sujet a été vécu ... [Mamuś] doit aussi me garder de la présomption (puis qu'elle m'en trouve) et contre l'irréel.⁵³

[I agree, Mamuś, absolutely agree, as long as the subject has been lived ... [Mamuś] must also keep me from presumption (because she finds me presumptuous) and against unreality.]

The collaborative aspect of their exchanges is acknowledged as each strives to keep the other grounded in reality. Sophie's diary becomes a way to make the voices of their conversations about ideas and art live again once she is isolated and alone in an alien and hostile England. Through the persistence of the energies released in their conflictual intellectual, emotional, and physical relationship, and the trauma of Henri's death on the field of battle in June 1915, Sophie realises her artistic project in the poetic expression of her everyday and the everyday of those around her, but in isolation and dispersion.

In her poetry notebooks, Sophie continued to invoke Henri to her artistic making, and his eyes and body to her own vision and experience.

15.I.16 ... chéri_ Voici presque [sic] un an et demi_depuis que Tu as disparu de mes yeux_mon p'tit rayon de clarté_ Je ne puis regarder Ton portrait_sans que les larmes envahissent mes yeux_ Je ne puis laisser errer ma pensée à volonté autour de Ton cher souvenir _⁵⁴

[... darling_Here it is already a year and a half since I lost sight of You, my little ray of light ... I cannot look at Your portrait without tears overwhelming my gaze_I cannot allow thoughts to run freely on Your memory_]

If Sophie convenes Henri by writing poems about him, their cult of the sun's energy, their brief time in Paris (Gillies 2021, 208–217), she also convenes him to her further life by asserting the artistic importance of her own body and thoughts.

In its project of self-fashioning, Sophie's diary and poems are at once 'diaristic' and yet point beyond the diary to her ambition to assert an artistic presence in the world.⁵⁵ It is an assertion of selfhood against a milieu in which that selfhood could find no reflection other than in the conversation that she continually revives with her partner Henri (Gillies 2018).

Notes

1. Jeff Walshe, Director of the Historical Centre at Wotton-under-Edge, maintains a Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska archive. He obtained a Town Council grant to mark the centennial of her death with a 'Sophie Gaudier Brzeska' weekend of diary and diaristic poetry readings in French and English, a heritage walk and visit to Sophie's former home, lectures, an identity workshop, and a Heritage Centre exhibition, 28–30 March 2025.
2. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Special Collections, Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex-Wivenhoe Park, Colchester Essex.
3. Briend and Lemny (2009, 198–222). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Ede (1971) includes his own extensive colloquial English translations of Henri's letters; cf. Pound (1960, 41–65; Cork 2009, 159; Koslow 1985; Materer 1977).
4. e.g. Ede (1971, 39–62, 89–133; Briend and Lemny 2009, 198–222; Chevillot 2017), e.g. pp. 39–40, pp. 99–100, p. 103, p. 169 ff.; cf. Gilboa (2009, 110–111, 136–7).
5. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Sophie's Writings: Green frogmouth Box 1: 'Creative Writing of Sophie Brzeska ... , writing case belonging to Sophie, ... in the order they were found' [R. A. Cole 1969].
6. Ibid. [Cole].
7. Ibid. vol.I July 1914–March 1915, June December 1917; Vol. II February–November 1915; Vol. III December 1915–May 1916 (months and years silently tr. English, PGillies).
8. Ibid. September 1916–December 1917.
9. Ibid. passages dated 1912, 1913, 'August–October 1917'; 'January 1915–August 31 1918'.
10. Ibid. 'End 1917–Autumn 1918', 'January–December 1919'.

11. Ibid. dated July 1916.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Henderson (2019, 1915–17), eg. sections titled 'À Ta Très Chère Mémoire' (Suite Finale 1–19).
15. Chevillot (2017, 39), cf. pp. 64, 71, 99, 181, 185, 227; Pound (1960, 39–43).
16. Cf. Nicola Shulman, review of *Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries*, Ed. Sarah Gristwood, *Times Literary Supplement* 6311 (15 March 2024), pp. 3–4; cf. Henderson (2019), Chapter 1 'Introducing the Diary', pp. 1–22.
17. Gaudier Brzeska Archive, Sophie's Writings, 'ritualised' notebook, p. 2, 'Juillet-août-septembre [July, August, September] 1914', vv 1, 3; vol.1, p. 2, 'La prière du pauvre' [The Prayer of the Poor], vv 1, 9; 'ritualised' notebook, p. 2, 'Glorification de Dieu' [Glorification of God].
18. Ibid. vol. 2, p. 2, 'La Beauté' [The Beauty], vv. 3–4; p. 11, Janv.1915 'La Visite' [The Visit], vv 3, 5; Ibid. Diary 1915–17, 'À Ta Très Chère Mémoire (Suite Finale 14)', pp. 1–3.
19. Ibid. vol. 2, p. 29, août [August] 1915, 'La Solitude' [Solitude], vv 18–19; p. 7, mai [May] 1915, 'Vogue la galère' [The galley sails on], vv 12–13; vol. 1, 'Glorification de Dieu' p. 2, vv 1–8; 'Mars 1915' [March], p. 92.
20. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska Diary Box 1, Folder 1 July, October-December 1915, Suite Finale 2, p. 1.
21. Ibid, vol.1 p. 9. vv 9–12.
22. Ibid. Writings 'Green frogmouth cloth box 1', 'Ritualised' untitled notebook of poems', p. 5, vv 1–2, 6–7; p. 6, vv 29–34.
23. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Diary 1915–17, 'À Ta Très Chère Mémoire (Suite Finale 2)', pp. 1–3; (Suite Finale 120), pp. 1–2; (Suite Finale 15), pp. 1–2.
24. Antliff, *Guerre sociale*, Sophie is referenced pp. 146, 151, 155, 157, 162.
25. Steinmetz (2020, 15–27, 59–86); Secrétain (1979, 13–19, 22–102); Gillies, (2021, 208–17); Licence (2017), Introduction pp. 11–14; pp. 47–54; cf. Sophie, pp. 15–20, 50–54, 71–81, 87–93, 121–127, 140–147, 164–173, 189–194, 200–205, 214–239.
26. Antliff (2010, 135, 137–141, 148–149, 161–162); cf. Zola's novel of late nineteenth century anarchist culture, *Paris* (1898) Jacques Noiray (ed.) [vol. 3: *Les Trois Villes*: vol. 1 *Lourdes*, vol. 2 *Rome*] (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 2002), eg. *Paris*, book 2, pp. 158–269.
27. Ibid. Writings, green frogmouth box 1, pp. 39, p. 39 vv 16–19.
28. Arthur Rimbaud, 'Le Bateau Ivre' [The Drunken Boat], <https://www.institutdefrance.fr/Le-Bateau-ivre-texte-integral>.
29. Baudelaire (1961, XIV, 21–22, CXVI, 136–8).
30. Corbière (2018), 'Présentation', pp. 6–49; cf. Steinmetz (2011), 'Préface', pp. 13–22, XVI, 'Tristan Suite', pp. 477–508.
31. <https://www.lastryge.fr/single-post/edmond-haraucourt>; <https://www.poesie-francaise.fr/poemes-maurice-rollinat> [3 Aug. 2024 accessed].
32. Henderson (2019, 1–22), esp. p. 8, pp. 18–22.
33. e.g. Ede (1971, 39–62, 89–133); Briend and Lemny (2009, 198–122); Chevillot (2017), e.g. pp. 39–40, pp. 99–100, p. 103, p. 169 etc.
34. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive: Sophie Gaudier Brzeska Writings: Vol. 1, pp. 90–91, p. 90 vv 1–2, 5, 7; 'compillage' (v 1): idiosyncratic in Sophie's poetry— often portmanteau use: assemblage/piller (combination but also to pillage, as savage or barbarian).
35. Vol. I, Octobre 1914, p. 71 vv 1–6.
36. Ready (2023, 131); note also Dr. Ewa Luczak's (English Institute, University of Warsaw) forthcoming book on eugenics and Polish identity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, personal conversation, May 2024, University of Warsaw.
37. cf. Bobrowska-Jakubowska (2004), *IV Artyści Polscy* [Polish Artists in Paris], pp. 61–177; Bobrowska-Jakubowska and de Weydenthal (1997); Wierzbicka (2004); Wittlin (1964).
38. Kazimierz De Woznicki Archive (Casimir de Woznicki), Bibliothèque Polonaise [Polish Library], Paris, Ms 3595: Emil Witski letters and visiting cards; digital version of catalogue available on request: catalogue Archiwum Kasimierza Woźnickiego 18780189490 Archive, Bibliothèque Polonaise (Polish Library).
39. Ready (2023), Sophie's letter to Romain Roland, pp. ix, xv–xvi; 1910 'Dispersal of my Property', pp. xxv–xxvi, Sophie leaves nothing 'for my mother because she simply murdered me with her thoughts' p. xxvi; pp. 129, 135–137.
40. Sophie Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Frogmouthgreen cloth box, Vol. 2, 31.
41. Ede (1971), eg. pp. 91–134; Freeman, *Ways of Life*, pp. 112–113; Cork (2009, 68–159).
42. Freeman, Ibid. p. 112; Freeman, p. 113.
43. Remastered edition Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2011.
44. Fisher (2018), Bibliography, p. 208, n.d. 1930's, pp. 46–50. <https://repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/295341> [3 Aug. 2024 accessed].
45. Ede, Appendix 1 (1971, 272–73).
46. Ed. Lemny, pp. 199–200, p. 200.

47. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Diary 1915–19, p. 2.
48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019.
49. Ibid. p. 2, cited in Sylvain Belluc, compte rendu (review) *etudes britanniques contemporains* 60/2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc/.10793> <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/10793> [5 Aug 2024 accessed].
50. Ibid. cited Flynn p. 2.
51. Ibid. cited Flynn p. 12.
52. cf. Chevillot (2017), Henri and classical influences of Antoine Bourdelle's Montparnasse studio, 'Bourdelle. La Mémoire des Choses 3 Avril 2024-18 Aout 2024', Exhibition at Musée Bourdelle, Paris.
53. Lemny, pp. 200–202, p. 201.
54. Gaudier-Brzeska Archive, Diary 1915–17, 'À Ta Tres Chere Mémoire' (Suite Finale 11) p. 1.
55. cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/diary_n?tab+meaning_and_use [5 Aug 2024 accessed].

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