

INTRODUCTION

BLAISE CENDRARS: A «SYMPHONIE CONTRASTANTE»

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It is entirely appropriate for *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* to devote a special issue to Blaise Cendrars since it is difficult to find a writer whose personality and works more closely embody the twentieth century in its multiplicity, versatility, complexity, elusiveness, its contradictions and paradoxes. That an American scholarly journal should honor the Swiss-born writer of the «entire world» seems even more befitting when one remembers that the «birth» of Blaise Cendrart (to become Cendrars a year later) took place in New York in 1911. While Jean Buhler (1) revealed to the wider public in 1960 that Blaise Cendrars, allegedly born in Paris, 216 rue Saint Jacques, was actually Frédéric Sauser whose birth was recorded in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, on September 1, 1887, the publication of *Inédits Secrets* in 1969 made clear that Freddy Sauser first used his pseudonym (with a «t») at the beginning of the text «Hic, Haec, Hoc» dated December 18, 1911, six days after his arrival in New York. (2) Beyond this possibly catalytic role in the decisive choice of a new identity, the American city inspired Cendrars's first great poem, *Pâques à New York*.

This is not the first recognition given to Cendrars on this continent. Dos Passos' well known acclamation of the writer as the «Homer of the Transsiberian» dates back to 1926. (3) Five years later, he translated several of Cendrars's poems with an enthusiastic introduction presenting them as part of the explosion in the arts which «had an influence in its sphere comparable with that of the October Revolution in social organization and politics and the Einstein formula in physics.» In his first tribute to Blaise Cendrars in 1938 Henry Miller characterized him as the «most contem-

porary of contemporaries.» (His admiration for his friend has not abated, as attested by a recent letter in which he states that «Cendrars was the greatest man (of any order) in the entire twentieth century»).

Yet, while numerous doctoral theses have been and are being written on Cendrars, it took twenty-four years after Miller's initial tribute before a selection of Cendrars's works with a critical introduction was published in this country (in 1962). Another ten years elapsed before a leading scholar devoted a chapter to his poetry in a major publication, and only recently has the English reading public been brought up to date on Cendrars's life and works with the introduction to *Complete Postcards from the Americas* (1976) and Jay Bouchner's *Blaise Cendrars, Discovery and Re-Creation* (1978), the first book length study to appear in English on Cendrars. In 1980 Cendrars will be featured in the Twayne World Authors' Series. (6) The French-reading public has been more fortunate owing to constant reprints of the works both in bound or paperback editions and a fairly steady stream of critical appraisals. Nevertheless, after the initial studies of Jacques-Henry L  vesque, Louis Parrot and Jean Rousselot (1947, 1948, and 1955), the corpus of Cendrarsian criticism in book form has remained relatively slim until this decade when France, Switzerland, England, Brazil, and now Canada and the United States are almost simultaneously rediscovering Cendrars. (7)

On the one hand Cendrars has a world-wide reputation. A critical bibliography, which still remains to be published, will be a voluminous and impressive document on the international recognition of both the man and the writer. From 1912 onwards, hardly a year has passed without articles appearing on Cendrars in literary journals or the daily press in various countries. On the other hand, up to recently Cendrars has been comparatively untouched by academic scholarship, and in his recent book Jay Bchner advances reasons for this «relative neglect». What interests us now, however, is the rediscovery of Cendrars in our age of post-modernism.

The question «who is Cendrars?» immediately brings on a torrent of contradictory statements. He is at once everything projected in the legendary figure he constructed for himself and everything that could compose an entirely opposite picture: a prototype of Deleuze's «era of multiplicity» and R. D. Laing's world of the «divided self.»

Recent research has established the major landmarks of Cendrars's life and unravelled most facts from fiction. Yet, in spite of all the «lies» that have been denounced, the image of the world-roamer still holds. The prosaic circumstances and the dates of Cendrars's two prolonged stays in pre-revolutionary Russia are now common knowledge. A recent article by Hughes Richard furnishes proof that Frédéric Sausser was granted a passport for travel to Russia on September 12, 1904 in Neuchâtel, and at the same time provides several pertinent pieces of information on the manner in which Freddy was sent to St. Petersburg as a Franco-German correspondent for a Swiss jewelry company.(8) No doubt is left as to the legendary nature of the famous fugue from the fifth floor of the family home. Similarly, three visits to the United States (1911-12, 1935, 1936) three long sojourns in Brazil (1924, 1926, 1927-28), as well as numerous forays into Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, England and Germany and countless other moves have now been verified. Until 1950 when Cendrars settled in Paris, where he died on January 21, 1961, it was no small task to keep track of the itinerant author's various addresses.

At the same time, however, the restless wanderer and indefatigable man of action has also been revealed to be a contemplative recluse who spent more time in libraries than on the open road. Cendrars himself provided the clue a long time ago: «I am a kind of Brahmin in reverse who contemplates himself in agitation,» he wrote in 1930.(9) Similarly, the aggressively boisterous story-teller has been known by some to be ominously silent. The bravado of the man who struck up a friendship with everyone from magnates to street bums could also shield the most reserved and private of individuals. The hardened buccaneer has also betrayed himself as a hypersensitive person easily moved to tears. The légionnaire of 1915 who, during World War II could not resist joining military action, albeit only as a war correspondent, is also the writer who exposed the absurd pandemonium that war is. The self-professed twentieth century Casanova nurtured a passionate but apparently platonic love for Raymone throughout his life. This

iconoclastic atheist was always a profound mystic at heart.

Turning to the body of the works, the critic finds himself equally lost in a maze of diverging paths. Anna Balakian's statement on Baudelaire in her critical appraisal of the Symbolist movement could aptly describe the situation of our elusive author:

«...one must recognize that Baudelaire's most salient characteristic is his diversity, his very lack of a salient trait, his virtual reversibility and multiplicity of character. The student of literary criticism could go through his verse and prose writings and find enough substantiation, compile enough quotes, to make him a Swedenborgian poet, after which, he could go back and find enough proof to arrive at a diametrically opposite conclusion...Historically he is maladjusted; he comes too late or too early.» (10)

In the case of Cendrars «Swedenborgian» can be replaced by an adjective chosen from any «ism» ranging from Symbolism to Post-modernism. No matter what point of view is adopted a feeling of inconclusiveness remains once the demonstration has been made. The writer's well-known fierce determination to keep aloof from all coteries, and literary trends has indubitably had successful results. Cendrars's works, however, do not only elude all classification by movement, but are also notable for escaping any categorizing by genre. This has been a standard cause for admiration or concern on the part of the Cendrars critics, who often feel they are on shifting sands.

Cendrars's presence in the world of twentieth century art and literature is as ubiquitous and meteoric as the man was in his life. Primarily a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist, he was also a reporter for several daily and weekly papers, a ballet librettist, a publisher, a film script writer, an art critic and the author of radio plays, among numerous other activities. We find him with Robert Delaunay engaged in the polemic of Simultaneism, with Abel Gance in the filming of *La Roue*, with Jean Cocteau at the *Editions de la Sirène*, collaborating with Darius Milhaud and Fernand Léger for the *Ballets Suédois* and announcing in *La Rose Rouge* the «disintegration of the cube» while Braque and Léger were among his best friends.

In literature, which is our sole concern in this issue, the ubiquity of his presence in all genres is paralleled by the number

of polarized forces that sustain the variety of his production.

At the forefront of the poetic revolution with Apollinaire in 1912, published in all avant-garde reviews throughout Europe (*Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion*, *Cabaret Voltaire*, *De Stijl*, *Valori Plastici*, *Avanscorpeta*, *Littérature*, *Sic*, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *La Caravane*, *Broom*, *Montjoie!*, *Les Soirées de Paris*), he still remained strongly influenced by his Symbolist master Remy de Gourmont. Futurist, Dada, Cubist and Simultaneist techniques and themes can be detected in the same works where he disavowed these movements. When, in 1924, he turned away from poetry in a violent reaction against Surrealism, he brought out the two volumes of poems which, in their determination to democratize poetry, foreshadow the «Pop» trends of our post-modern era. (The use of Gustave Lerouge's popular serials in *Documentaires* and the candid presence of the author-narrator in *Feuilles de Route* with all the triviality of his likes and dislikes—including his weight—are but two instances of the numerous «Pop» aspects of Cendrars's manner.)

As a prose writer, Cendrars also offers a series of contrasting images. The surrealist text of *L'Eubage* contrasts sharply with the many humorous realistic short stories in *Histoires vraies* or *D'outremer à indigo*. The terseness of language in *L'Or* does not prepare the reader for the torrential flow of the prose of *L'Homme foudroyé* or *Bourlinguer*. The expression of violence and destructiveness in *Moravagine* and the first part of *Dan Yack* (*Le Plan de L'Aiguille*) is balanced by the lyrical tenderness of *Dan Yack* and *Mireille* in *Les Confessions de Dan Yack*. The visionary of *Lotissement du ciel* is also the war reporter of *Chez l'armée anglaise*. Such a list could continue endlessly, leaving the critic at a loss in his search for a unifying point of view. There is in Cendrars something of a Villon, a Rabelais, a Restif de la Bretonne, but he also evokes typically twentieth century figures such as Henry Miller, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer or Jerzy Kosinsky. In many respects he embodies the spirit of modernism with its arrogance, its enjoyment of the transitory, the more savoured for the awareness of the inevitable and sudden confrontation with nothingness. At the same time he foreshadows the irrealist view of reality which characterizes the nineteen-seventies.

As long as the legend of Blaise Cendrars the "bourlingueur" eclipsed Cendrars the writer, his prose was read as a fanciful mythologizing of the self, whereas it is now perceived as a myth-

ology of fiction. The so-called "autobiographical" writings are less autobiographical than pieces of apparently pure fiction. Texts which see to unconditionally praise the futurist and the modernistic credo of dynamism, movement, fascination with machines and living dangerously, actually contain one of the most forceful indictments of the mechanization of man in the twentieth century. Cendrars created two of the most powerful heroes of mythic stature in the century—Moravagine and Dan Yack. His attraction to free-wheeling individualists such as Sutter and Galmot and the mythopoetic creation of his own persona in the later writings give the impression of a fundamental nostalgia for a disappearing race of heroic characters. In this Cendrars appears to run counter to the current dehumanization of literature. Yet a reading of the four major novels (*L'Or*, *Moravagine*, *Dan Yack* and *Rhum*) as a cycle reveals a gradual deconstruction of the very notion of "hero" and a thoroughly contemporary questioning of the function of writing. The variegated tapestry of characters and events in the short stories and the tetralogy is also ultimately a calculated and obstinate victory of the word against silence, of action (i.e. writing) against death (that of language). The writer who in 1930 dedicated his novel *Rhum* to the «young men of to-day/tired of literature/to prove to them/that a novel/can be an act»(11) would not have been out of place in the sixties when, as Susan Sontag sums it up, it was commonly accepted that «art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world.»(12) But Cendrars outlives his age. His legacy is a symphony of contrasts for which to-day's pluralist oecumenical temper provides a natural audience.

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The present collection of essays, selected from papers presented in a series of MLA seminars during the last three years, will echo, on this side of the Atlantic, homage given to Cendrars during this decade in France and Switzerland. (13) It also marks the first anniversary of the Blaise Cendrars Society founded in New York a year ago. The following articles do not pretend to solve the riddle of the Cendrarsian Sphynx nor to give a final reckoning. Dealing solely with works available in English translations (hence, for instance, the absence of a text on *Dan Yack* of which only half has been translated), they offer a series of reconnaissances from dif-

ferent directions.

The essential polarity of Cendrars's works and personality is brought out by Nicole Dupré in her study of the intertwining of the myths of Icarus and Jonah throughout the entire production of the author. Howard Nitzberg recalls the Symbolist heritage of the early poems and shows how they contribute to the store of modern orphic poetry. In contrast, Everett F. Jacobus discusses the de-centering, the dissemination of the self in *Prose du Transsibérien* and *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* against a Freudian and transactional analysis background and emphasizes what he considers to be the author's primary literary appeal: the manipulation of the persona-reader relationship through Protean-like shifts in the personality and behavior of the narrator. Focusing on the void which conspicuously occupies the chapter «Mascha» at the center of *Moravagine*, Stephen K. Bellstrom not only clarifies the structural complexity of Cendrars's most striking and powerful novel, but demonstrates the importance of the thematics of hollowness, a dynamics of fullness and emptiness, in the writer's creativity.

In conclusion Jay Bochner's article is significantly not a closure but an invitation to sense the *differance* of Cendrars. «Paris, Port de Mer,» the last section of *Bourlinguer*, illustrates the digression technique of free association and dynamic improvisation in Cendrars's later writings. Bringing out the secret coherence of the text which is not about a port but actually about books and reading—a modern correlative of Montaigne's essay of «books»—Bochner defines the author's relationship to reading and consequently to writing. The metaphor of books as voyage leads to the conception of the narrative as a «lightly drawn map of fading tracings» through which the traditional notion of permanence of the written word is replaced by the image of the text as a port, a place of arrival and departure.

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NOTES

1. Jean Buhler, *Blaise Cendrars, homme libre, poète au coeur du monde* (Bienne, Switzerland: Editions du panorama, 1960).

2. *Inédits Secrets*, Ed. Miriam Cendrars (Paris: Le Clu' Français du livre, 1969) p. 195.

3. John Dos Passos, «Homer of the Transsiberian,» *Saturday Review of Literature* (October 16, 1926), pp. 202-222. Repr. in *Orient Express* (New York: Harpers, 1927), pp. 155-67.

4. John Dos Passos, trans. *Panama* (New York: Harper, 1931), p. VII.

5. Henry Miller, «Tribute to Blaise Cendrars,» *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (Shanghai) vol. 7, 1938; rpt. in *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 152. ALS received from Henry Miller, 22 November 1979.

6. This refers respectively to:

Walter Albert, *Selected Writings of Blaise Cendrars* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

Mary Ann Caws, «Blaise Cendrars: A Cinema of Poetry» in *The Inner Theatre of Recent Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

Monique Chefdor, Introd. and Trans., *Complete Postcards from the Americas* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 1-44.

Jay Bohner, *Blaise Cendrars. Discovery and Re-Creation* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

Monique Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*, Twayne World Authors Series, (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980).

7. Jacques Henry Lévesque, *Blaise Cendrars ou du monde entier au coeur du monde: introduction aux poésies complètes de Blaise Cendrars* (Paris: Denoël, 1944), and *Blaise Cendrars, étude suivie d'une anthologie des plus belles pages* (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1947).

Louis Parrot, *Blaise Cendrars* (Paris: Seghers, 1948).

Jean Rousselot, *Blaise Cendrars* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1955).

For recent publications in France, a complete listing would be too long here. Consult Jay Bohner or Monique Chefdor in their respective publications.

In England, see appendice.

In Switzerland, two major publications have appeared simultaneously:

Yvette Bozon-Scalzitti, *Blaise Cendrars ou la Passion de l' Ecriture* (Lausanne: L'Age d' homme, 1977), and Jean Carlo Flückiger, *Au coeur du texte. Essai sur Blaise Cendrars* (Neuchâtel: A la Baconnière, 1977), as well as a chapter on *Les Pâques à New York* in Richter, Mario, *La crise du Logos et la quête du mythe* (Neuchâtel: A la Baconnière, 1976), pp. 63-95.

In Brazil: Aracy amaral, *Blaise Cendrars no Brasil e os Modernistas* (Sao Paulo:

Martins, 1970), and Alexandre Eulalio, *A Aventura Brasileira de Blaise Cendrars* (Sao Paulo: Brasileira Edições Quiron e Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1978).

8. Hugues Richard, *Sauser avant Cendrars, Revue Neuchâteloise*, 23 ème année, No. 89 (Hiver 1979-80).

9. *Une nuit dans la forêt*, (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1969), p. 138.

10. Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement, A Critical Appraisal* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 31.

11 *O. C.*, Vol VI, p. 178.

12. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Noonday Press, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1961), p. 21.

13. In addition to the volumes mentioned earlier we should note three special issues published on Cendrars in France: *Europe*, No. 566 (June 1976); «Cendrars aujourd'hui, présence d'un romancier,» *Le Plein siècle I, Lettres Modernes*, Minard, 1977 and «Cendrars vivant», *Sud*, No. 26 (summer 1978). In Switzerland, the city library of La Chaux-de-Fonds held an «Exposition Blaise Cendrars» from September 29 to October 30, 1979.