

THE AMERICAN FICTIONS OF BLAISE CENDRARS

by

JONATHAN DAVID INGLE

(Under the Direction of Ronald Bogue)

ABSTRACT

Despite his continuing fame in the Francophone world, Swiss-born author Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) remains virtually unknown in the United States, despite the fact that several of his key works are set in America and deal with American culture and history. This dissertation offers close readings of Cendrars' poems "Les Pâques à New-York," "Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles," his novel *L'Or*, and his nonfiction book *Hollywood: la Mecque du cinéma*, as well as selections from other relevant writings. In investigating Cendrars' biography, which is always clouded by his own wholly or partially fictional version of the events of his own life, I assert that because he changed his name from Freddy Sauser (his birth name) to Blaise Cendrars (the name he adopted and maintained for the rest of his life) while living in New York City in 1912, and at the very moment he composed his first great poem ("Les Pâques à New-York), it can be plausibly claimed that while Freddy Sauser was born in Switzerland, the great writer Blaise Cendrars was born in New York, and thus is in that sense American. I also examine in-depth Cendrars' relationships and correspondences with American writers John Dos Passos and Henry Miller, both of whom consistently promoted Cendrars to English-speaking readers. I investigate film treatments of his novel

L'Or written by William Faulkner and Sergei Eisenstein and argue that Cendrars' impact on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is evident and profound. I trace the ongoing influence of Cendrars on American writers, including but not limited to the Beats, the New York School poets, and even rock and roll icon Patti Smith. I conclude with a call for American readers, writers, scholars, and publishers to engage with the work of Blaise Cendrars, and for his books to be translated and published in America so that a new generation can access his rich and vital body of work in its entirety.

INDEX WORDS: Blaise Cendrars, Henry Miller, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Sergei Eisenstein, California Gold Rush, Hollywood, Modernism, 20th century French literature, transnational literature

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For Mary Anne, Joseph, Madeleine, and Eliza; for Ron, Judy, and Stephen, all of whom showed love and patience along the way. For Mike M. and Bill W., without whom none of this would be possible.

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INTRODUCTION

On November 2, 2017, the *Daily Mail* of London reported that Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, had composed a poem (in English no less) to celebrate the 13th birthday of Sophie, a British schoolgirl. Macron's poem was in response to a poem Sophie had written about the Eiffel Tower. Macron's poem, titled simply "For Sophie" is noteworthy because in it he names several French authors who wrote about the Eiffel Tower: Jean Cocteau, Louis Aragon, Charles Trenet, Guillaume Apollinaire and, most notably for the purposes of this dissertation, Blaise Cendrars.

Can we imagine the current American president (or any American president, perhaps) replying in verse to a young girl who had written him? Can we imagine an American president citing the names of famous American writers as part of his poetic response? But the point here isn't a political one necessarily. France esteems its writers and artists in ways America simply does not. The name "Blaise Cendrars" is so commonly known in his adopted home country of France that no footnote is required when the President invokes it. In France, Switzerland, and even in Chile and in other parts of South America, there are streets named after him. There are schools named for Cendrars in Paris and in his birthplace of La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. His visage has graced postage stamps in France and Switzerland. In the Francophone world, his books remain in print and in demand, and musicians and theatrical artists regularly produce adaptations of his work.

In the United States, however, Blaise Cendrars has nowhere near as high a profile. According to Jeff Bursey, writing in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 2004, “Today, the Swiss-born French writer Blaise Cendrars is mostly invisible to American readers . . . French scholarship on Cendrars is leagues ahead of academic and critical work in English” (58). English-language translations of his work go in and out of print, and substantial parts of his oeuvre have never been translated into English at all, or only in truncated versions.

This relative neglect of Cendrars in the United States exists despite the fact that since the 1920s his writing has gleaned considerable support from a small group of devotees. The noted American novelist John Dos Passos was the first to translate his work into English, and was so smitten with Cendrars’ poems that he published a deluxe version of some of them complete with his own watercolor illustrations. American writer Henry Miller spent a lifetime trying to repay Cendrars for what he perceived as a debt owed for Cendrars writing the first-ever review of Miller’s groundbreaking novel *Tropic of Cancer*; Miller advocated for Cendrars wherever and whenever he could, in interviews and in print, and worked tirelessly behind the scenes to arrange American publication for his literary hero’s books. William Faulkner never advocated for Cendrars publically, but he read and admired *L’Or*, his novel concerning the California Gold Rush, and wrote a screen treatment for a Hollywood film based on that novel (though the film, titled *Sutter’s Gold*, released by Universal Pictures in 1936, did not utilize Faulkner’s work). *L’Or* became an important but generally unacknowledged source for Faulkner’s own book *Absalom, Absalom!*, which many consider to be the great American modernist novel. Echoes of Cendrars’ poems, especially the long, maximalist, adventurous “Prose

du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jeanne de France” and “Le Panama, ou les aventures de mes sept oncles,” can be heard in the work of the top writers of the Beat Generation, including Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Cendrars’ journalistic efforts of the 1930s, with their free-flowing mix of fact and subjectivity, impacted later American journalists and essayists such as Joseph Mitchell and A.J. Liebling. Even today, a coterie of Americans remain devoted to Cendrars and his writing. Luc Sante, author of *Low Life* (1991), *The Factory of Facts* (1998), and the recently published *The Other Paris* (2016), writes in an email correspondence with me that he is “really interested in the shadowy terrain between fact and fiction in [Cendrars’] autobiographical works.” For Americans who know and love Cendrars’ work, the task of bringing him to wider attention in the United States becomes a sort of calling, a job gladly undertaken and not easily given up on. As critic William Dow wrote to me on October 21, 2017, “there is something about Cendrars that is difficult to let go.”

Much of what Blaise Cendrars had to say about America in the first half of the twentieth century seems even more pressingly true today. In his first major poem, “Les Pâques à New-York,” written in 1912, he chronicles the contrast between the super-rich and the abject poor in America’s greatest metropolis (what today we would call the crisis of income inequality) and decries the commercialization of spirituality and the machinations of high finance. In opposition to those financial and social forces he seeks some more authentic spirituality, some older, even ancient wisdom that might serve as a bulwark against the chaos of modernity. In America and around the world there are many such seekers now, people disenchanted with received truth and the hyper-speed of contemporary life, who look for something that will ground them, some truth not

contingent on sociocultural conditions of the moment but instead rooted in wisdom traditions which transcend specific creeds. In his 1925 novel *L'Or*, Cendrars couches a critique of American cycles of boom and bust in a historical fiction set in the days of the California Gold Rush. The protagonist, Sutter, accumulates vast wealth via the acquisition of land and the development of agriculture, but is ruined by the discovery of gold on his property. Cendrars was fascinated by the irony inherent in Sutter's story, and saw in it both the dangers of unchecked striving (on Sutter's part) and of economies based on speculation and abstraction rather than on tangible goods of exchange. His ruminations on these matters are still relevant in today's America, since the issues he raises are pointedly present in the current economy. *Hollywood: la Mecque du cinéma*, published in 1936, describes the titular city, and by extension the entire American nation, as a walled, forbidden place where the rich, famous, and powerful sequester themselves behind barriers both physical and conceptual, and from which emanate the infinite reflections and refractions on which the film industry relies. His writing about walls, and walls within walls, and the exclusion of those deemed unworthy or dangerous, has obvious salience in today's nativist, isolationist political climate. Though in this book Cendrars' comments are specific to the film industry, he also ponders the wider cultural effects of the promulgation of illusion, and especially of the massive proliferation of what amounts to a sort of waking dream state. Were he alive today, what might he say about the advent of social media, with its trillions of shares and re-shares of information, much of which is dubious at best? What would he think about portable screens that most people carry with them all the time?

Though Blaise Cendrars was literally born in Switzerland, he was not born with that name. His given name was Frédéric Sauser, and that's the name he went by until his fateful trip to New York City in 1911. It was in New York City that he adopted the nom de plume he would go by for the rest of his life, Blaise Cendrars. His first writing signed "Blaise Cendrars" was "Les Pâques à New-York," and thus it can truly be said that Blaise Cendrars first emerges in America. That fact alone makes his writings about America of interest. Today he remains a prescient and astute commentator on the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

SAUSER TO CENDRARS

Blaise Cendrars was born Frédéric Louis Sauser (Freddy) in the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, in the Swiss Jura, near Neuchâtel, on September 1st, 1887. His father, Georges Frédéric Sauser, was originally a teacher of mathematics, but before Freddy's birth he had given up teaching for financial speculation, inventing, and international business schemes. Freddy's early years were peripatetic (a condition that would characterize most of Cendrars' life), as the family resided in Egypt, where M. Sauser invested in an extravagant, newly constructed hotel in Heliopolis; in Naples, to which they were drawn by the father's land speculation on the slopes of the Vomero near the mythical tomb of Virgil; in England, with Freddy's maternal grandfather, in Paris, and in Montreux. As Cendrars wrote in *Vol à voile*, published in 1932:

Je me souviens d'un grand bruit d'usine autour de mon berceau et de beaucoup, beaucoup d'activité à la maison, des visites, des réceptions, puis de beaucoup de luxe en Egypte, avec palais, yacht, domestiques, victoria, chevaux, puis d'une vie un peu plus retirée en Angleterre dans un château appartenant à mon grand-père, puis d'une grande maison en Italie, puis d'une enfilade de pièces désertes à Paris, puis d'une toute petite villa au bord du lac à Montreux, enfin, coup sur coup, de plusieurs

déménagements en Suisse, déménagements précipités, déménagements dans des appartements de plus en plus pauvres, avec, puis sans jardin, mais où alors je gagnais la rue . . .

(OC 4: 257)

The years the Sauser family spent in Naples had particular significance for Freddy, and Cendrars wrote about that period of time in *Bourlinguer* (1948), one of the four great autobiographical books he composed during his exile in Aix-en-Provence during the Second World War. “Naples où j’ai passé ma plus tendre enfance,” he writes (OC 6: 25). Onboard the ship bringing the family from Egypt to Naples, while his parents, brother, and sister lounge in the salons, young Freddy walks the decks and befriends a Sicilian sailor named Domenico:

Domenico me parlait beaucoup de New-York quand nous prenions les quatre heures à la cambuse où il y avait toujours deux, trois matelots en train de fumer la pipe qui l’écoulaient parler, mais je n’en ai rien retenu, distrait que j’étais par ces hommes tous plus ou moins barbus qui se faisaient tous la tête inquiétante du commandant. En revanche, je n’ai rien oublié de ce que Domenico racontait de son pays natal, Taormina, la ville peinte, le soir, quand j’avais obtenu la permission d’aller coucher avec lui au poste de l’équipage après avoir fait une scène à maman.

(OC 6: 26)

Domenico tells Freddy tales of his many travels and of sea monsters, then reveals the treasures hidden away in his seaman's chest:

Domenico ouvrait son coffre de matelot dont il extrayait petits pots et petits flacons de pommades et d'eaux vénériennes avec quoi il se badigeonnait et oignait partout. Mais il sortait également de son coffre les pièces de son trésor intime: un bateau dans une bouteille dont il m'expliquait la construction, des vues sur cartes postales de villes et de ports asiatiques, une étoile de mer, un hippocampe, une branche de corail qu'il me pressait dans les mains, un grand coquillage des mers du Sud qu'il m'appliquait contre l'oreille et je finissais tout de même par m'endormir malgré les rires, les jurons, les interpellations, les traînements de pieds, la forte odeur d'urine et de sueur, le remugle du poste de l'équipage où l'on avait du mal à respirer, et l'inévitable air de mandoline sur le seuil, et la voix du tenorino . . .

(OC 6: 28)

Freddy is so enamored with Domenico's stories and keepsakes, particularly with his stories about New York City, that when the ship, the *Italia*, docks in Naples Freddy, just roused from sleep, thinks (and hopes) that they have arrived in New York instead:

Je me souviens que lorsque Domenico vint me tirer de mon sommeil, je nous croyais arrivés à New York et que ma désillusion fut immense

lorsque Domenico, qui me serrait fortement dans ses bras, traversa le pont avant et se mit à gravir l'échelle qui menait à la passerelle éclairée de l'*Italia*.

(OC 6: 29)

These early, almost embryonic memories regarding Domenico may well have been the seeds for Freddy's later peregrinations, and for the globetrotting reputation that Blaise Cendrars would acquire.

According to Miriam Cendrars, the Sauser family arrived in Naples on 26 September 1894. They took up residence at the Palazzo Scalese, at the foot of the Castel Sant'Elmo and the Certosa San Martino. From the balcony of their house, Freddy observed what Miriam later describes as “un grouillement de monde, une incompréhensible foule” (BC 68):

les rues étroites, les ruelles sombres, les venelles pleines de linges à sécher qui descendaient au Basso-Porto, se situait exactement au pied des murailles abruptes du fort Saint-Elme (le canon sonnait midi, son souffle chaud gonflait les rideaux de la salle à manger, ce qui faisait chaque fois tressaillir maman), dont la base était le tracé rectiligne du Corso Victor-Emmanuel-II et dont les deux côtes étaient dessinés, celui de gauche, par la voie à crémaillère du funiculaire, bordée d'une rangée de cactus à raquettes, à épines et à coutelas, figuiers de Barbarie, agaves, aloès portant leur fleur au bout d'un mât souvent brisé, celui de droite, par un vieux

mur, et par endroits fort haut, plein de fougères, d'iris, de capillaire, grouillant de lézards qui couraient vivement se dissimuler dans les fentes sous ces touffes de petites fleurs bleues si fragiles qu'on les croirait de porcelaine et que le vulgaire nomme des « ruines de Rome », crête de tessons de bouteilles et qui suivait tous les tours et les détours, les circonvolutions de la Salita San-Martino, une rampe très animée qui montait au Voméro, doublé d'un soubassement de ronces, d'épines et de broussailles, de coulées de détritrus, de gravats, de poteries et de vaisselles cassées, d'ustensiles hors d'usage que le petit peuple habitant la Calade jetait par-dessus le mur, et d'éboulis comme un vieux rempart.

(OC 6: 101)

Freddy quickly became close friends with Elena, the youngest daughter of his father's Neapolitan friend Sartorio. Miriam Cendrars describes Elena as "l'élue de Freddy" (77), and it is clear from Cendrars' account of their relationship (in *Bourlinguer*) that the two had a special bond. Freddy and Elena played together at the site of Virgil's Tomb, near the Sauser residence in Naples, hunting snails and wild asparagus, watched over by her chaperone Maria, slipping into the primordial beauty of the gated grounds:

C'est la porte de mon paradis. Il suffit de mouvoir un bout de planche du vantail qui pivote sur un clou à grosse tête, de glisser la main dans la fente ainsi obtenue, d'atteindre le verrou à l'intérieur, de le faire glisser d'un effort du doigt en se tortillant et en se démanchant le poignet, de pousser

du genou, et la vieille porte cède, tourne sur ses gonds, grince, on peut entrer.

J'entre.

C'est toujours la même chose.

Un choc.

Cigales étourdissantes, chaleur, chênes verts et lentisques. Clairière aromatique, silence soudain, solitude, présence physique de la solitude comme une énigme. Deuil. Asparagus. Herbe rare.

Qui te regarde? Elena et moi étions chaque fois saisis de cette présence que l'on devinait. Nous restions plantés là, hésitants sur le seuil. On n'osait pas entrer. Franchir le pas. Je tenais la petite fille par la main. Le cœur battait . . .

(OC 6: 94)

But in this Virgilian paradise, among the ancient stones that marked the supposed tomb of the poet, disaster struck. Elena was killed, felled by a stray shot from an unskillful hunter. Decades later, Cendrars described the scene:

. . . un cercle de chasseurs consternés qui discutaient le coup, et au pied du grand pin parasol, au milieu d'un parterre de bonnes femmes à genoux qui reprenaient en chœur les lamentations de la vieille Maria penchée sur elle, était étendue l'enfant chérie, accotée par les racines antiques, sur un

lit d'aiguilles de pin, belle comme un ange, déjà au Paradis, les mains jointes, une gouttelette de sang sur l'annulaire gauche, tombée de son œil gauche, au coin duquel, près de la tempe, perlait une légère mousse, comme de la sueur sanguinolente ou de la rosée. Un plomb avait dû l'atteindre au coin de l'œil et pénétrer jusqu'au cerveau, un plomb qui avait dû ricocher sur le tronc de l'arbre plusieurs fois centenaire. Maria lui avait fermé les yeux. Ma petite fille reposait douce et ravie.

(OC 6: 116)

Elena's death, which occurred when Freddy was only seven or eight years old, was something that he never forgot, and which became emotionally entangled with the later deaths of other female romantic interests (see Lenotchka and Héléne, below). As late as 1943-44, when composing *Bourlinguer*, Cendrars' memories of his youthful love with Elena were still vivid: "Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines, / L'innocent paradis plein de plaisirs furtifs, / Est-il déjà plus loin que l'Inde ou que la Chine?" (OC 6: 96).

Freddy's personal loss was compounded by a series of business failures by his father. First, M. Sauser had a scheme to import good German beer to Italy using newly-developed refrigerated train cars. The beer was purchased and loaded for shipment, but the train cars sat on the rails at various stations on route, so that when the delivery was finally made in Naples, the beer had all gone bad. Money down the drain. He then turned to the tourist market, partnering with photographers to mass-produce picture postcards of various sights around Naples. This venture met with only modest success, generating considerably less income than the overly optimistic M. Sauser had predicted. Freddy saw

his father continually grasping after wealth and status and experiencing one disappointment after another. The father's boom and bust business cycles (the general trend being downward, more bust than boom) had a long-lasting effect on the son: "Et c'est pourquoi je tiens l'argent en mépris. La vie est ailleurs. Le tien, le mien, le mien, le tien, jamais le sien, sinon pour l'en dépouiller!" (OC 6: 100).

M. Sauser's Neapolitan schemes soon collapsed entirely, and in March 1896 he was forced to give up the residence at the Palazzo Scalese, liquidate what assets he could, and return the family to Switzerland—to La Chaux-de-Fonds, Neuchâtel, and then to Basel, where Freddy was enrolled in a German-speaking school. His classmate Paul Haberbosch remembered him as a middling student, kind, punctual, somewhat timid and impressionable, and quite friendly toward his fellow students. Yet even at this early age, there seemed to be something different about Freddy. "Sa différence, c'est sa passion pour la lecture. En cachette, pendant des nuits entières, il lit. N'importe quoi. Tout. Jules Verne, Heidi, les Mille et une nuits, Robinson Suisse, la Comédie humaine: la découverte de Balzac le transporte d'enthousiasme, mais à qui en parler? Pour son anniversaire, il demande des livres" (BC 97). Another book Freddy read during this period, probably in 1898 or 1899 was Gérard de Nerval's *les Filles du feu*, which Miriam Cendrars says made a huge impression on him.

During the 1898-1899 school year, Freddy became friends with Auguste Suter. The two were classmates and were the same age. Suter would later become one of the most prominent Swiss sculptors of the 20th century. His friendship with Cendrars would remain constant throughout their lives. Suter lived in Zurich during the First World War, where he became acquainted with James Joyce. He was also the grandson of Johann

August Suter, about whom Cendrars would later write the novel *L'Or* (1924). Doubtless, Cendrars first heard the story of Colonel Sutter (anglicized from the original Suter) from his school friend Auguste.

Suter later recalled an episode from his school days with Cendrars that perhaps provides an early glimpse of the latter's fascination with things American:

Vers la fin de l'année scolaire, Fred[dy] disparut de la circulation. La raison, je ne devais l'apprendre que bien plus tard, par lui-même: il y avait à l'époque, de passage à Bâle, le grand cirque américain Barnoum, un cirque gigantesque qui mit toute la ville en émoi. L'enchantement irrésistible de ce cirque fit rôder Fred autour de ses tentes à longueur de journée, au détriment de l'école. On le vit même, haut perché à côté du cocher, faire le tour de la ville sur un attelage de quatre chevaux, transportant l'énorme mât du chapiteau du cirque.

(BC 98)

Though Freddy would not travel to the United States until over a decade later, his eagerness to skip school for an American circus in particular indicates that even as early as 1899 he was interested in American popular culture.

In the summer of 1900, shortly before Freddy's 13th birthday, the Sauser family traveled to Paris for the Exposition universelle. The style that was omnipresent during the exposition was Art Nouveau, but more influential on Freddy Sauser was the Russian exhibit highlighting the progress of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, construction of which

had begun in 1891 and which ultimately would connect Moscow with Vladivostok.

Miriam Cendrars writes that:

Le Transsibérien est le clou de l'Exposition universelle. On le visite: voiture-lits, voiture-salon, wagon-restaurant. Le luxe du décor est éblouissant. Boiseries, cristaux, volutes fleuries, lourds rideaux et passementerie. La famille Sauser s'assied à une table sur des sièges en peluche rouge. Un serviteur en toque d'astrakan et blouse russe brodée et ceinturée apporte un plat de zakouskis. Un énorme samovar en cuivre doré chauffe l'eau du thé. Par la fenêtre, ô surprise! Freddy voit défiler un paysage: steppes, fleuves, forêts, moujiks, équipes de travailleurs sur les voies ferrées et les ponts en construction. L'effet est saisissant: simulant le mouvement du train, la toile peinte se déroule. Et à la fin du voyage apparaît un Chinois en robe de soie brillante ornée de dragons. *Pékin!* Tout le monde descend!

(BC 100)

Freddy could not have known that in just four or five years he would be a passenger on the actual Trans-Siberian Railroad, or that he would in 1913 publish the long poem "La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France," or that his American translator John Dos Passos would later introduce him to the English-speaking world as the "Homer of the Trans-Siberian."

Between 1898 and 1904, Freddy attended schools in Basel and Neuchâtel, including the École de Commerce in the latter city. His grades were poor and his absences frequent. His academic education showed no more consistency than his home life. By 1904, things in Neuchâtel came to a head:

[Freddy] made love to three young English girls, went boating, rode an unpaid-for American motorcycle, ran up large debts at wine-shops, florists, and newspaper stands . . . and accumulated, by the end of his year at the École de Commerce, 375 unexcused absences (counted in class hours). *Vol à voile* tells in detail the story at this juncture: confessions to his father, a relationship with another, older woman, the boy being locked in his room, and, finally, his escape out of the window, with stops in his father's and sister's rooms for cigarettes and money. Freddy Sauser jumped on the first express through Neuchâtel, which as it happened was headed for Basel. The first station out of Neuchâtel, one at which express trains do not stop, is Saint-Blaise.

(Bochner, 18)

Might the name of this village northeast of Neuchâtel be linked to the creation of Freddy's nom de plume some eight years later? There's no proof of such, but in Cendrars' biography, hard proof is sometimes hard to come by. The coincidence is certainly worth noting. Saint-Blaise would have been the first station through which

Freddy's train passed after his "escape," and his escape from his family home marks a great event in his life.

The "escape out of the window" is described in detail in Cendrars' *Vol à voile* (1932). After a confrontation with his father, as described above by Bochner, Freddy planned and rehearsed the details of how he would gather some belongings and leave by way of an upstairs window. He noted the comings and goings of his father, sister, and brother, as well as the scheduled arrivals and departures of the international trains at the Neuchâtel station. Then, the day of action arrived: "Le dimanche, de grand matin, j'étais prêt" (OC 4: 270). He went from room to room in the house, taking

vingt ou trente pièces de cent sous que ma sœur tenait dans un tiroir de sa commode, puis je filai dans le cabinet de mon père rafler tous les paquets de cigarettes qui traînent sur les meubles . . . En traversant la salle à manger, je fourrai dans mes poches une demi-douzaine de services en argent et en passant par le salon j'ouvris le secrétaire de ma mère et volai quelques billets de cent francs.

(OC 4: 270)

He climbed out the window, lowered himself nimbly from a balcony to a terrace, then repeated the maneuver, dropping from the terrace to the street below:

je me laissai choir dans la ruelle et je ramassai valise et manteau pour m'acheminer tranquillement vers la gare. A la gare, je pris un billet de

troisième classe et montai dans l'express de Bâle en partance. Bâle, pourquoi Bâle? J'aurais tout aussi bien pu partir dans l'autre direction!"

(OC 4: 270)

Freddy's escape was a curious mix of planning and spontaneity. Though he pondered his plan for days, when the moment came, he acted as if on autopilot:

J'avais agi avec sang-froid, comme si j'avais eu préparé mon coup de longue date, alors qu'en réalité tout cela avait été improvisé à la va-vite et qu'à la dernière minute seulement j'avais fini par céder à une impulsion qui, certes, avait été précédée de quatre ou cinq jours de rêverie, d'envies intermittentes, mais non pas d'un plan bien arrêté et encore moins d'un acte de volonté. En somme, j'étais sorti par la fenêtre comme un somnambule et c'est pourquoi je ne m'étais pas cassé le cou.

(OC 4: 271)

This moment of escape was tremendously important for Freddy Sauser, marking as it did the first time he struck out into the world on his own. For someone who later became well known for global peregrinations and sudden departures and arrivals, the flight from the window of his father's house was significant, the prime event in a pattern that would continue for the rest of his life and his art:

C'était la première fois que je venais d'obéir à ce besoin d'évasion qui si souvent s'est emparé de moi, m'a fait faire des excentricités, prendre des

résolutions extrêmes, aussi soudaines qu'irrfléchies, risquer gros, même la mort, pour me réveiller éreinté, mais ravi, dans l'absurde, au fond d'une impasse ou en pleine fugue, mais ne regrettant jamais rien, ni personne, et toujours extraordinairement content et fier de ce que je viens de sacrifier, tout en me moquant gentiment de moi-même et quoique soulevé par l'enivrante sensation d'être perdu, ou d'aborder un nouveau monde, ou d'avoir fait peau neuve, me méprisant chaque fois un peu plus d'avoir marché et de croire encore en la vie.

(OC 4: 271)

The contrast between his active life (what Cendrars later called “la vie dangereuse”) and his contemplative life (exemplified by his years of exile in Aix-en-Provence during the Second World War, during which he produced a tetralogy that many consider his crowning literary achievement), marked Cendrars for the rest of his years.

Yet maybe citing the window escape and the travels to Russia and beyond as defining moments in Cendrars' biography is too pat, too neat, as he himself recognized. In his series of interviews with Michel Manoll, recorded and broadcast on French radio and published in 1952 as *Blaise Cendrars vous parle . . .*, the following exchange occurs:

— Vous partiez sans but défini et sans espoir de retour?

— Est-ce que je sais, moi. Je suis parti vers l'Est parce que le premier train à passer en gare m'a emmené vers l'Est; si cela avait été un train qui m'eût mené

vers l'Ouest, j'aurais alors transbordé à Lisbonne et j'aurais fait l'Amérique au lieu de faire l'Asie.

— C'est une date extrêmement importante dans votre vie car, à partir de ce moment-là, elle devait se diviser en deux séries: vos aventures en Orient et vos aventures en Occident. Depuis ce moment-là vous n'auriez jamais plus de toit.

— Ce sont des choses que l'on dit quand on raconte de histoires . . .

— Si, enfin . . .

— . . . pour mettre un peu d'ordre dans sa propre existence. Mais ma vie n'a jamais été coupée en deux. Ça serait trop commode, tout le monde pourrait couper sa vie en deux, en quatre, en huit, en douze, en seize.

(OC 8: 543)

Though Cendrars is undoubtedly right—no life can be neatly divided in two, in four, and so on—he's also correct when he says that these are the sorts of things we say when we tell stories. Cendrars was, above all, a storyteller, a fabulist even. His impulse to tell stories shows not only in his prose and poetry, but in his approach to his own life story as well. Are the details of the window escape, as Cendrars relates them, one hundred per cent accurate? Likely they are not. Do they make for an interesting and useful story? They certainly do.

From Switzerland, Freddy traveled to Germany, where in Pforzheim he met a Jewish-Polish jewelry trader named Rogovine. The pair traveled to Moscow, arriving in

September 1904.¹ Once in Russia, Freddy and Rogovine traveled widely, including an epic journey from Moscow to Harbin on the newly completed Trans-Siberian railroad. They eventually ended up in China, where Cendrars later claimed he almost died of hunger “before finding a job as a stoker in the newly opened Hôtel des Wagons-Lits. He spent the winter reading, then burning for fuel, copies of the *Mercure de France* pillaged in the Western consulates during the Boxer Rebellion” (Bochner 19).

By January 1, 1905, Freddy was in St. Petersburg, Russia, where he presented himself to a new patron, Mr. Leuba, one of the most successful jewelers in the city. Though he had only left Switzerland a few months before, the travels he’d undertaken and the people, places, and things he’d seen had influenced him profoundly. As Miriam Cendrars describes those months with Rogovine, “Ce n’est pas long: c’est l’espace du passage d’une vie à une autre. Le temps d’oublier l’enfance” (141). Working for Leuba, Freddy weighed, measured, sorted, and graded various jewels, some for export back to Switzerland for use in the watchmaking industry. Leuba was a demanding boss, and his workshop was a highly secure facility in which “Freddy a l’impression d’être un prisonnier dans cette place forte, protégée par un réseau de verrous commandés électriquement” (142). Life at the jeweler’s table, and at the library, where he spent much of his off-work time, failed to satisfy Freddy, who, after all, mere weeks before, had been on a grand adventure: “Contrastes. Saint-Petersbourg. Le salon blindé et sa chambre, les gemmes et ses livres; depuis son arrivé, Freddy n’a pas d’autre horizon” (143).

¹ Among the various Cendrars biographical studies, and even between biographical accounts and Blaise Cendrars’ own version of events, there are differences of date and place, especially in these early years. For the sake of consistency, the timeline I will employ is the one laid out by Miriam Cendrars, Blaise’s daughter, in her 1984 book *Blaise Cendrars*. When there are discrepancies between Miriam Cendrars’ timeline and the timelines of others, I will note that difference in the text.

And yet, outside the walls of the House of Leuba, momentous events were occurring. On Freddy's third Sunday in St. Petersburg—January 22, 1905—Father Georgy Gapon led a group of unarmed demonstrators to the Winter Palace, where they intended to present a petition to Czar Nicholas II. They were fired on by soldiers of the Imperial Guard, killing or wounding an estimated 1,000 people. The watershed event became known as Bloody Sunday, and began the most active phase of the Revolution of 1905.

During this turmoil, Leuba's confidence in Freddy grew, and he began sending him on various errands, including trips to the Crédit Lyonnais, on the Nevsky Prospect, where Leuba kept his accounts in the belief that in case of revolution, a French institution would be safe. Freddy was thrilled to be outside Leuba's locked compound, and relished the life of the city:

J'étais heureux d'être dehors. Je respirais. En sortant du Crédit Lyonnais je flânais sur la Nevsky . . . l'hiver la vie nocturne bat son plein sur les patinoires, dans les cafés, chez Philippof, dans les boîtes de nuit où l'on danse, dans les cabarets, dans les tripots, à *l'Ours*, chez *Palkine*. Les concerts, les théâtres, les premiers cinés. J'hésitais. Je traînais. J'allais boire un verre. Je m'attardais.

(OC 6: 550)

His early interest in cinema is noteworthy, since in the 1920s Cendrars would work in film as an actor and director, including collaborations with Abel Gance. But in 1905 he

was simply an enthusiast, absorbing the life of the St. Petersburg streets and enjoying Russian cinema.

Freddy's life in St. Petersburg centered on his work for Leuba, forays into the artistic and cultural life of the city, organizing a soccer team (the sport being at that time relatively unknown in Russia), and haunting the rare book collections at the Imperial library, where he immersed himself in "splendides éditions originales, cuirs et dorures fanés, pages jaunies, textes inconnus, oubliés, mystérieux: il en est ivre" (149). It was here that Freddy first became familiar with the poetry of François Villon, in particular "La ballades des pendus." Villon would remain a touchstone for Cendrars throughout his life: "Si Freddy est attiré par la poésie, François Villon sera son maître" (150).

Freddy's cloistered life at the library and behind the secure walls of the jeweler's warehouse stood in stark contrast to his life in the streets, where he not only soaked up St. Petersburg's art, music, literature, and film, but also observed and became involved with its active revolutionary politics. As Cendrars wrote in *Le Lotissement du ciel* (1949), the streets were filled with

. . . coups de fusil, mitrillades, bombes éclataient de plus en plus souvent, accompagnés d'un bruit sourd de foule qui piétine et qui grossit ou se débande et se met à courir dans les *nagaiikas*, et les cris rauques des cosaques excitant leurs petits chevaux sauvages perçaient jusqu'à moi à travers les rideaux de fer abaissés de ma chambre fort, le jour vint où je me disais à chaque manifestation que c'était peut-être « *la plus belle* » qui

brandissait le drapeau rouge parmi la foule qui défilait en chantant les hymnes socialistes-révolutionnaires sous mes fenêtres grillagées.

(OC 6: 548)

“La plus belle” was Lenotchka, a Finnish woman whom Freddy had met, become infatuated with, and through whom he became increasingly involved in anti-Czarist, revolutionary action. But according to Miriam Cendrars, young Freddy Sauser was perhaps less inspired by legitimate political beliefs than he was by romantic urges. While Russia bled throughout the summer of 1905, Freddy mostly occupied himself with soccer, horseback riding, music, and theater: “Les nuits blanches de l’été, nuits sans nuit de Saint-Petersbourg, doublent le temps de vivre.” (BC 153) Though he wanted to be close to Lenotchka, he lacked the revolutionary urgency that would, in her eyes, fully qualify him to do so. Here, as early as 1905, we see, perhaps for the first time, the apolitical Cendrars, not precisely indifferent to politics, but certainly placing aesthetics above the nuts-and-bolts questions of practical politics:

Tourment: le remords de négliger Lenotchka et ses activités. D’une part, il a peur, d’autre part, il ne se sent pas vraiment concerné par le mouvement révolutionnaire et par les revendications du peuple russe, et encore moins par celles de la classe ouvrière. Pourtant, ce grand rêve de liberté, la grandeur de la vision d’une société nouvelle dont Lenotchka lui parle la touche, l’émeut. Il pourrait presque y croire. Mais son chemin est ailleurs.

(BC 153)

In a sense, Cendrars was always elsewhere, everywhere and nowhere at once. He was a contemplative in motion, usually surrounded by bustling activity, as he was in Russia in 1905, but zealously guarding his independence, his freedom from the strictures of doctrine and cant.

On 27 October 1905, water, gas, and electricity to St. Petersburg were cut. Most commercial activity ceased and shops locked their doors. Freddy was closed inside Leuba's fortress-like house, but instead of despairing, or taking to the streets in active revolutionary protest, Freddy experienced a key moment of revelation:

J'étais enfermé dans la chambre blindée. On ne sortait pas. C'était la grève générale déclenchée depuis le début de la semaine. L'électricité était coupée. On ne savait pas ce qui se passait. Les journaux ne paraissaient plus. Je m'ennuyais. Pas un bruit ne filtrait à travers les rideaux de fer. La ville était comme morte. Pas un fiacre dans la rue. De temps en temps un coup de sifflet me faisait dresser l'oreille, une interpellation dans la journée, et la nuit, la galopade d'une patrouille, un coup de feu isolé, des vociférations sous mes fenêtres, un cri d'épouvante. Encore un malheureux qui s'était fait prendre, que l'on menait à l'hôpital ou au commissariat ou qui se faisait passer à tabac au coin de la Sadowaïa.

(OC 6: 552-3)

Cendrars continues (in *Le Lotissement du ciel*):

C'est jour-là et justement à cause de la coupure du courant électrique que j'eus la révélation de la vertu des pierres dont parle Marbode et de leur doux et lointain scintillement d'étoiles perdues, au même titre que celles du ciel, dans l'immensité et la profondeur, le vide de l'Univers, vu que, comme à la Cour du Tsar, je m'éclairais aux bougies et que dans cette lumière, douce, chaude, intime, discrète, aussi charnelle que l'émanation et l'odeur familière d'une peau humaine qui respire, le cou, les épaules offertes, la nuque voluptueuse, le décolleté troublant d'une belle femme, sans rien dire de sa chevelure embaumante, les gemmes ne sont plus ostentatoires ni les feux des pierreries vanité diabolique, orgueil satanique, mais les bijoux brillent d'un éclat secret, intime et les pierres taillées, n'aveuglent pas qui palpitent, sont vivantes, tournent de l'œil avec émotion, humides et tendres, ont l'air de se réveiller comme tirées d'un long sommeil magique pour se mettre à célébrer la splendeur de la création comme les saints immobilisés dans la prière qui ignorent qu'ils sont nimbés, émettent des rayons lumineux et que leur face éclatante et rouge qui trahit leur concentration d'esprit et reflet de la Splendeur qu'ils contemplent en toute humilité dans l'au-delà, action passive, feu gelé, mort vivante, message intermittent d'un soleil qui nous parvient avec un tel retard et d'une si prodigieuse profondeur que la rayon froid qui nous

touche, venant d'un si lointain passé pétrifié, est une annonce, une promesse, le futur, un futur contingent qui peut-être ou n'être pas.

(OC 6: 553)

With the October Revolution in full swing, Freddy Sauser stayed under lock and key and pondered the mysteries of gems and jewels. The same youth who would later be known as Blaise Cendrars, whose reputation as a globetrotter in near-perpetual motion would be well-established, showed a tendency for focused contemplation that would persist through a change of name and the passage of decades.

For Freddy, 1906 was a year of travel and upheaval. According to Miriam Cendrars, he accompanied Rogovine on many trips, including possibly to Persia, Mongolia, the far north, Tblisi, and elsewhere. In between trips, the pair would return to St. Petersburg, where Freddy would reestablish contact with Lenotchka and her revolutionary comrades. Lenotchka took him to Tervajoki, near Vyborg and close to the Finnish border, where the revolutionaries kept what they believed to be a safe house. The house turned out to be less than safe, and was raided by Czarist authorities. In a notebook, along with various poems and other writings, Freddy had imprudently written down chemical formulas for bomb-making. He quickly tore out the writings he wished to keep, then threw the rest of the notebook into the fire. He was arrested, along with Lenotchka and the others. Under police interrogation, he explained that he was not Russian, claimed to speak only French, and was simply a Swiss visitor. He denied knowing anything about the political opinions held by Lenotchka and the others. He told the authorities that he was employed by a highly-respected Swiss jeweler who would

provide him with outstanding references. After an intervention by the Swiss embassy, Freddy was released. He returned to St. Petersburg, where he found M. Leuba, who was furious with him. Rogovine proposed another trip, this time to Tashkent, and around the same time, Freddy learned that Lenotchka and her comrades had been sentenced to death. Under the guidance of his archivist friend (identified only as R.R.), Freddy threw himself headlong into reading and writing, which were perhaps the best means of coping with the grave difficulties he'd experienced over the course of the year. R.R. gave Freddy a journal bound in black oilcloth, in which Freddy took notes on his copious reading. The journal would later be known to Cendrars scholars as *Le Cahier Noir*. It provides invaluable information about Freddy Sauser's reading habits and thoughts over the course of these early years.

On the first page of the black notebook, Freddy inscribed a quote from Chateaubriand's novella *Atala*:

Ainsi passe sur la terre tout ce qui fut bon, vertueux, sensible! Homme, tu n'es qu'un songe rapide, un rêve douloureux; tu n'existes que par le malheur; tu n'es quelque chose que par la tristesse de ton âme et l'éternelle mélancolie de ta pensée!

(IS 5)

Aside from its tone of romantic yearning, the Chateaubriand quote is significant because of its specific source. *Atala* is a novella set among the First Peoples of the American South, but there is good reason to doubt that Chateaubriand ever lived among Native

Americans or journeyed to the southern parts of the United States. Critics have questioned whole sections of the travels he claims to have made, yet *Atala* and other of Chateaubriand's works, most notably *René*, *Les Natchez*, and *Voyage en Amérique* were terrifically influential, impacting later writers from Byron to Hugo to Stendhal. Though their aesthetic approaches are quite different from one another, it is striking that the young Freddy Sauser, who would within a few years be known as Blaise Cendrars, would quote Chateaubriand at the very beginning of his first real attempt at literary production. Though he could not have known it in 1906, Cendrars, much like Chateaubriand, would come to write and publish significant works about America and, also like Chateaubriand, would have critics question what parts of that work were based on actual experience and what parts were sheer fantasy.

In November and December 1906, it became increasingly clear that M. Leuba was not going to renew Freddy's employment contract. If Freddy wished it, Leuba would even arrange for his return to Switzerland before Christmas. But before travel arrangements were made, Freddy met a 19-year-old woman, Hélène Kleinmann, with whom he fell quickly and deeply in love. He spent the Christmas holidays with the Kleinmann family, who received him with kindness and affection, according to Miriam Cendrars. However, Freddy's funds began to run dry, as he was no longer in Leuba's employ. In the month of March alone he read Michelet, Durkheim, Dante, Darwin, Hippolyte Taine, and others, and recorded his impressions in the black notebook. By April, he was out of money and had received word from Neuchâtel that his mother was quite ill. Promising Hélène that he would write often and that they would reunite soon,

Freddy left Russia and returned home to Switzerland for the first time since his escape from his family's home three years before.

In Neuchâtel, Freddy's brother Jean-Georges hardly recognized him: "C'est la Russie qui l'avait changé. J'ai vu partir un gamin et trois ans plus tard j'ai vu rentrer un homme. C'était sa destinée qu'il part si jeune, trop jeune; on n'a jamais pu empêcher cela. En Russie, ses loisirs furent le football, l'amour, et la révolution . . ." (BC 167). Throughout May and June, Freddy and Hélène exchanged impassioned letters full of plans for Freddy to return to St. Petersburg or for the pair to arrange for Hélène to travel to Switzerland. He shared with her his ongoing reading: works by John Stuart Mill, Tolstoy, Abbé Prévost, Goethe, Nerval, de Maupassant, Turgenev, George Sand, Dostoevsky, Molière, Malebranche, and others. Then, an unusual silence from St. Petersburg. Freddy's letters went unanswered. Finally, by July 1907, the terrible news came: Hélène was dead, burned to death in her bed when a lamp fell over. In the black notebook, the months of July, August, and September offer no more letters to Hélène, in fact offer no more writings of any kind, but instead simply catalog Freddy's reading, which takes a turn for the gloomy, including Verlaine, Poe, Swedenborg's *Les Merveilles du ciel et de l'enfer*, and Baudelaire. Freddy's last inscription in the black notebook consists of the following lines:

Je crache sur la beauté qui amène le malheur,
 Je crache sur la raison qui veut être trop belle,
 Je crache sur le destin qui ne veut rien admettre,

Je crache sur les mots qui trompent l'animal,

Je crache sur la vie qui n'écoute pas la vie!

(IS 29)

Again, the autobiographical myth Cendrars created should be noted. Much of his writing about his life, and especially that concerning the years up until 1906, seems fantastical and exaggerated. Given that there's little real documentary evidence about his activities before 1906, in most cases Cendrars' word is all one has to go on. Whether or not he went everywhere he claims he did, or whether or not Rogovine was a real person or a fantasy, Cendrars' descriptions of this period are lively and compelling:

. . . je devais faire durant quelques années tant de voyages avec lui, dont trois à la foire de Nijni, deux en Chine, un en Arménie, un peu de contrebande de perles via l'hinterland du Farsistan, les hauts plateaux d'Ispahan, les déserts de l'intérieur, les passes de Merv, Boukhara, une expédition à l'embouchure de la Léna, expédition qui avait pour but d'atteindre des gisements d'ivoire fossile et qui faillit nous coûter la vie et à Rogovine tout son avoir si, en nous rabattant de plusieurs centaines de kilomètres dans l'est du delta, nous n'avions découvert dans la toundra sibérienne des peuplades totalement inconnues où nous échangeâmes le chargement de nos trente-sept traîneaux remplis de disques de sel gemme contre autant de disques d'argent pur et quelques sacs de *xhisli* qui est du

saumon pourri, un court séjour à Bombay, où Rogovine avait été convoqué pour estimer un diamant . . .

(OC 4: 251)

Between 1906 and 1911 Freddy was in Neuchâtel, Basel, Brussels, Paris (where he raised bees and met Gustave Le Rouge, a writer of popular potboilers, whose serialized novel *Le Mystérieux Docteur Cornélius Cendrars* would later transform into his 1924 book of poems *Kodak (Documentaire)*, in what some considered an act of plagiarism but might well be instead an early example of what has come to be called the cut-up method of composition), and once again, St. Petersburg. In May or June of 1909, in Bern, he met Féla Poznanska, a Polish student. Féla's journal entries, which were published in *Blaise Cendrars: Inédits secrets* in 1980, reveal a bit about the effect young Freddy Sauser had on her. A schoolmate tells her that "Il est Suisse, mais par pur hasard. Il aurait pu naître dans n'importe quel autre pays, et il s'y trouverait parfaitement chez lui" (42). In her own words, Féla describes her first impressions of him: "Je le regarde, et je trouve qu'il ressemble peu aux gens de son pays. Il porte la chevelure d'un Gorki, la vareuse de velours et la large cravate d'un Baudelaire et, dans les gestes, la grâce d'un Italien. Il pourrait aussi être polonais" (42). By her summer and autumn 1909 and winter 1910 journal entries, Féla was confessing her love for Freddy. The feeling was by all accounts mutual.

Curiously, however, Blaise Cendrars never mentioned Féla by name in any of his published writings, and it is only because of the material collected in the *Inédits*,

published almost twenty years after his death, that readers and scholars learned of her existence, even though Freddy and Féla became husband and wife in 1914, and that she was the mother of his three children Rémy, Odilon, and Miriam. Cendrars not only neglected to mention Féla, but he never even acknowledged being married at all, “despite the autobiographical nature, or at least the autobiographical appearance, of most of his work” (Bochner 22). Biographer Jay Bochner has an interesting take on this omission:

His great secrecy concerning certain matters obliges us to be openminded, on the one hand about what he has hidden, and on the other about what he has chosen to tell, which may not be so fanciful after all. For example, what are we to make of these two lines near the end of *Le Transsibérien*?

Bella, Agnès, Catherine et la mère de mon fils en Italie
Et celle, la mère de mon amour en Amérique

Féla was in New York, and we know Bella and Agnès [they were other girlfriends of Freddy’s during his Swiss school years, and Bella was Féla’s best friend]. If we have found three of the five women, certainly we must continue to believe in the possibility of the two others, and another child who to this day remains unknown.

(Bochner 22)

This masking of Féla is a prime example of how Cendrars both reveals and conceals the facts of his life in his body of work which, as Bochner observes, is generally considered to be autobiographical, or at least to have the look and feel of autobiography. The Cendrars oeuvre is full of such sleights of hand: revelations, omissions, facts masquerading as fiction and fiction rendered as fact, and multiple tantalizing clues as to the existence of written works perhaps yet undiscovered, or which perhaps never existed at all.

In March 1911, Féla left Paris for New York City, where she stayed with relatives. By the summer of that same year Freddy was in Strelna, a city overlooking the Gulf of Finland, not far from St. Petersburg, where he generally loafed and gave occasional lessons in French and German. By the autumn, he was back in St. Petersburg itself. In November, his work scarce and his funds low, Féla unexpectedly sent him a boat ticket to travel from Libau, Latvia to New York. On November 21st, 1911, he boarded the steamship *Birma* and traveled to New York City, where he joined Féla and her family.

Freddy was 24 years old. He had already traveled extensively, and was now about to embark upon his first trip to the United States. He set down his impressions of the journey in a prose piece titled “Mon Voyage en Amérique,” which would remain unpublished until the *Inédits* of 1980. The first entry in the journal is dated November 1, 1911, Saint Petersburg. It begins, “J’entreprends ce voyage pour être loin de l’hideuse face humaine . . .” (IS 149). He looked forward to the transatlantic voyage, not only for its own sake, but also because he believed it would relieve him of the burdens of life he felt were oppressing him, especially those of life in the crowded city, and that it most especially would help him to escape from himself:

L'épouvantement de la face humaine va cesser pour 15 jours. Dans la rue, à chaque pas je tressaille, je défaille: je vois partout les visages de mes mauvaises pensées, les abjectes gueules de mes plus sales désirs, passer.

Qui peut traverser une rue sans pâlir plusieurs fois d'effroi?

(IS 150)

To be free of the city streets and sail across the wide sea seemed to represent for Freddy a true leave-taking, one in which he could leave his old self behind. In bidding goodbye to the old world and anticipating the new, he writes "Ave, Virgo siphilitica! Je vais en Amérique" (IS 150). Is the syphilitic virgin the world he's leaving behind, or is it the world to which he is traveling, about which he has only vague notions? I believe it is more likely the latter, America being virgin territory to him but hardly unsullied, though the ambiguity is interesting to consider.

But these lines and the ones quoted above were written in St. Petersburg, before the voyage had even commenced. In the coming month, he would learn much, and his transformation from Freddy Sauser to Blaise Cendrars would well and truly commence. What was important was that he was about to be in motion, engaged on a course of action, however uncertain, which must have come as a considerable psychic relief to him after several years of being mostly stuck in Switzerland. "Déjà je vogue et je divague," he writes several days before boarding ship, indicating the relief he felt even in anticipation of the travels to come.

The first sections of “Mon Voyage en Amérique” detail the train trip Freddy takes to his port of departure, Libau. Throughout, his tone is that of a cynical, judgmental, jaded youth. It’s an affected tone, one of arch condescension and faux ennui:

Dès les premiers jours, j’avais jugé mes gens. Je suis resté chez eux pour me punir et me faire honte d’avoir été dupé par les sentimentalités stupides. Le rôle d’impudent parasite m’a été favorable. Il m’a guéri. Je les ai quittés sans effort, et sans égard, me drapant hautainement du mensonge. Je reviens sur ma décision de leur expliquer, au moins par lettre, ma façon d’agir; de même je ne leur ferai point de saleté. Ces fripouilles ne le sont pas assez pour qu’on leur fasse une cochonnerie. Ils ne la comprendraient pas. Oh la vertu frigide des petites gens! Mieux vaut n’y plus penser. Je me tais.

(IS 155)

For a young man whose later self, Blaise Cendrars, would be known as a man most at home with “the common people,” who would move among poets and artists as easily as he would among stevedores and cattle herders, the discomfort Freddy feels with his world and the people in it is striking: “Qu’il est doux de se détacher des choses; oui, mais surtout, de se détacher des gens!” (IS 155). And yet, there are glimpses of Cendrars, the contemplative in motion par excellence, even in these youthful, somewhat callow writings: “Si l’on y pouvait mieux écrire, je serais prêt à passer toute ma vie dans les trains, devant une bougie allumée, face à face avec moi-même” (IS 155).

On board the train to Libau, Freddy passed through Pskov, Bezdonys, Vilnius, Grodno, and Druskininkai before arriving in Warsaw, taking notes along the way. He likes Warsaw, comparing its exteriors favorably to those of Paris and expressing his opinion that the Polish people are closest in spirit to the French. After Warsaw, the train continued through Poland to Libau. Along the way, Freddy notes the “paysage immense de plaines et de forêts” and writes “Je suis aussi troublé sexuellement” (IS 159). The route seems circuitous, but there is no evidence that a more direct route was available, and in any case, that is the route that Freddy Sauser took. The last journal entry he wrote before leaving the train read:

Je voudrais bien relire mes lettres. C'est là que, dans mille millions de mensonges, je me retrouve, avec un plus de sincérité. J'en ai écrit des tas, à une foule de gens indignes de les recevoir, à droite, à gauche. Elles me seraient bien précieuses à cette heure-ci.

(IS 160)

Freddy already recognizes himself as a liar, though it seems that the lies to which he refers are not creative and productive, as one might view the “lies” that build the Cendrars myth later, but instead are more commonplace ones.

On the 19th of November 1911 Freddy arrived in Libau, Latvia, on the Baltic Sea. On his first night there, awaiting the ship's departure, he was already thinking of a future book about America that he might write:

5 heures du matin. — Je me lève d'une mauvaise somme pour écrire ceci: si jamais j'écris un livre sur l'Amérique, impressions, notes ou autre — je mettrai comme motto cette phrase relevée dans « Mon cœur mis à nu », carnet posthume de Baudelaire: « Tout est prière . . . Quand le démocrate chie, il dit qu'il prie . . . » Je suis sans illusion aucune.

(IS 161)

There is quite a mingling of the sacred and the profane in the Baudelaire quote Freddy says would serve as his motto for any book he might write about in the future, and in many ways this attitude that America is the land where sacredness, patriotism, and profanity are thoroughly intertwined is given full voice in Cendrars' poems "Les Pâques à New-York" and "Le Panama, ou les aventures de mes sept oncles."

On November 20, the day before departure, Freddy visited a doctor who examined his eyes and diagnosed a case of trachoma, a bacterial eye infection. He worried that because of the eye infection he would be turned away from America, unable to debark at New York. His worries quickly became hysterical:

Si l'on ne me laisse pas débarquer à New York et si l'on me réexpédie par la même ligne, c'est-à-dire en Russie, je me suicide. Mon dénuement serait trop complet, et je n'ai plus rien à faire ici. Mon essai de vie active aura de suite échoué.

(IS 161)

His fears, however, came to nothing, though he mentions them and the trachoma in his farewell letters to Bella (his and Féla's best friend) and to his family.

The next section of "Mon Voyage en Amérique" covers the period from the departure of the *Birma*, on November 21, 1911, to its arrival in New York on December 11. Leaving the docks, Freddy does not feel what he supposes ocean travelers are supposed to feel: "Je n'ai pas ressenti cette émotion de quitter la terre ferme, dont parlent tant de voyageurs, ces affres, cette rétrospectivité cinématographique . . ." (IS 165). Despite being on a ship full of passengers, Freddy keeps largely to himself, standing at the bow: "Je suis seul, appuyé au bastingage" (IS 166). He leaves Europe without reservation, or so he claims, though the vehemence of his farewell belies some level of regret: "Je tourne résolument le dos à la terre. Vieille Europe, je t'ai quittée, par un de tes plus vilains bouts; là où, de tes dessous déguenillés, pullule une vomissante vermine!" (IS 168). Freddy is all venom and longing, puerile qualities that would mature into something greater far sooner than he could have known.

Beginning on November 29th, the *Birma* encountered a ferocious storm at sea. The tempest lasted for several days, at least until December 3, punctuated by one day of calm between bouts of high winds, pounding rains, and enormous, rolling seas. Critic Raymond Dumay, in his introduction to the Club français du livre edition of Cendrars' *Oeuvres complètes*, describes Freddy's shipboard experience during the storm as his "mise à feu" during which the poet was truly born. He further connects this experience with a prevailing attitude held later, by the mature Cendrars: "La paix qui doit loger le bonheur est au cœur du risque" (viii). Cendrars biographer Jay Bochner only partially agrees with Dumay's assessment, writing that "the travails of Freddy Sauser continue to

plague the emerging Blaise Cendrars for months to come.” He agrees, however, that Freddy’s experience of the storm “affords a fine instance of the poet’s discovery of his own authentic nature. It is an epiphany of sorts, a moment of insight which . . . had to occur again any number of times before its lesson would take hold” (26). Freddy describes the storm’s relatively serene beginnings on November 29: “Le bateau semble bondir sur les flots, léger, heureux, fleuri d’écume, une nef aventureuse. Les flancs palpitent. Cela me rappelle mon temps d’école buissonnière, mes après-midi passées en voilier sur le lac de Neuchâtel.” (IS 173). With the barometer visibly falling, however, Freddy knew that conditions were going to deteriorate quickly.

By the predawn hours of the day, what Freddy called “Les Walpurgis des vents” had begun. “Les vagues nous prennent de flanc. Nous roulons terriblement. Elles rejaillissent à bâbord avec des phosphorescences lilas, sur une mer toute éboulie d’écume” (IS 174). The *Birma* negotiated the waves, which grew bigger by the hour, surging up one side of them and down the other. Freddy walked the decks as long as he could, then descended to the lower decks:

J’ai le courage de parcourir le bateau, de visiter les émigrants, de descendre aux cales. Et tandis que partout ce n’est que pleurs et grincements de dents et récriminations, tandis que tous à genoux récitent, en commun, des prières et des psaumes—juifs, protestants, catholiques, orthodoxes, mahométans, persans—réjouissant baragouinage—je les méprise encore plus avec leur Dieu, même au bord de la mort et jusqu’en plein naufrage.

(IS 175)

Freddy's contempt for his fellow passengers could not be clearer or more hypocritical. After all, his ticket was paid for by Féla and her family, and left to his own devices he was practically penniless, yet he sneers at those in steerage huddled together against the storm. This youthful egotism stands in stark contrast to the later Cendrars who, when on ocean voyages, would often eschew the captain's table and choose instead to spend his time with the mechanics and grease monkeys in the boiler rooms below deck.

For all his arrogance, however, Freddy found himself powerless and overawed in the face of the terrific storm:

Aspect fantastique. D'énormes collines roulent, s'avancent, marchent; ondoient, avec le balancement gracieux des mammoths; viennent du plus profond lointain, se suivent, s'approchent lourdement. Tout à coup, comme une colère allume la flamme des yeux, autour du bateau, elles ouvrent d'immenses gueules, dardent des langues infernales d'écume; cratères, crachent des laves bouillonnantes de furie. Puis elles se précipitent, se brisent en trombe éternuée d'eau, en clapotis ruisselant et furibond. Et faisant le gros dos, elles passent, passent quand même et câlines sous le bateau qui s'élève et elles reprennent de l'autre cote leur défilé impassible et éternel de monstres apopléthiques, tandis que le navire plonge au fond des abîmes.

(IS 175)

Overwritten though his descriptions of the storm may be, they do capture the very real sense of terror that Freddy, the other passengers, and even this ship's crew must have felt during the days and nights of the storm.

December 1st was a day of relative calm, a day to assess the damage thus far: "Bilan: 4 chaloupes emportées, 2 hommes à moitié assommés, tout le bastingage de bâbord arraché, le pont de commandement démoli, avaries à la machine" (IS 177). The captain told Freddy that in his 26 years of navigation, it was only the third storm of such strength he'd ever witnessed. On December 2nd, the storm revived, battering the ship once again. The damage was severe enough that the *Birma* headed for the port at St. John, Newfoundland, where it remained for a few days before setting off for New York.

December 10 was the last full day of the voyage. The sun was bright throughout the day, and at sunset Freddy stood on deck admiring the view and contemplating what lay in store for him in America: "C'est un couchant comme ceux de Versailles en automne, très mélancoliquement grave. Versailles, Versailles la morte au seuil de l'Amérique!" (IS 193).

On December 11, 1911, the *Birma* docked in New York, and Freddy Sauser stepped onto American soil for the first time. "Nous arrivons par un beau clair de lune, splendidement étoilé. Voici le premier phare," he wrote in his journal. "Le brouillard passe, les cloches s'éteignent et de nouveau les feux résonnent" (IS 193-4). His life's journey, from Neuchâtel to Egypt to Naples, to St. Petersburg and Siberia and China, had brought him here, and he was still only 24 years old. Though decades of rich life experience awaited him, Freddy intuited that something more than an ocean had been

crossed in his journey to America: “J’attends le point du jour, l’aube de ma vie . . . C’est comme si j’avais passé d’un monde à l’autre . . . Vais-je crier ainsi qu’un nouveau-né?” (IS 194). He penned the last entry in this set of travel notes, writing that “les tracasseries du débarquement ne m’ont laissé aucun loisir d’écrire” (IS 194). He would resume his journal one week later, one December 18, with an attempt at a short story titled “Hic Haec Hoc.” The piece is unfinished, and perhaps notable for only one thing: he signs his name not as Freddy Sauser, but for the first time adopts a pseudonym, the somewhat awkward “Blaise Cendrart.”

In New York, Freddy first stayed with Féla and her family at 845 Jennings Street in the Bronx. He cast about for employment, with little success, and for the most part Féla supported him while he wrote and spent countless hours at the main branch of the New York Public Library. In his article “Cendrars *Downtown*,” published in 1989 in *La Revue des Lettres Modernes*, Jay Bochner provides the most complete view of Cendrars’ activities and movements during his 1911-12 stay in New York. Bochner helps to flesh out a relatively undocumented period in Cendrars’ “fameuse biographie impossible” (27). Among the details Bochner includes are a meeting with Enrico Caruso, at which the famed singer gave Freddy and Féla tickets to see him perform in Puccini’s *La fanciulla del west*, which was still being performed at the Metropolitan Opera, having debuted a year before, in December 1910. The opera is based on David Belasco’s 1905 play *The Girl of the Golden West*. Though the opera is now considered one of Puccini’s lesser works, an opera with the American West as its subject was quite new, and its effect on Freddy Sauser was perhaps potent. It was likely his first exposure to the American West

as a worthy subject for art, and the seed that later grew into *L'Or*, his 1924 novel of the California Gold Rush, may well have been planted here.

Freddy also visited Café Joel, on 41st Street near 2nd Avenue, a casual sort of cabaret frequented by writers, artists, journalists, and vaudeville actresses from the grand music halls of the day. Given its proximity to the notorious Tenderloin district, some of these showgirls were also essentially prostitutes. Bochner connects Cendrars' experiences at Café Joel and other similar nightspots to the themes of his first great poem, "Les Pâques à New-York," written mere months later, in April 1912: "Cendrars est sensible à l'énergie de ces show-girls sous la férule d'un puritanisme qui consent à faire de l'argent en prétendant ne pas se salir les mains. Cette relation des exploités à l'argent est un aspect important des *Pâques*" (36).

At some point in early 1912, Freddy moved from Jennings Street in the Bronx to 70 West 96th Street in Manhattan, occupying a room in the last remaining wooden building on the street. His status with Féla was unclear, and his pockets were empty as usual. Bochner reminds us that later, Blaise Cendrars considered this to be the most miserable period of his life. As Freddy wrote in his journal on February 29,

Et me voici à la fin de mon histoire. Je suis de nouveau seul, à New York, éreinté, si nerveux que, la nuit, au moindre bruit, je crie et que je dors avec de la lumière dans la chambre; sans le sou, traqué, inquiet, ne pouvant pas payer la chambre, etc. . . . ne trouvant rien, n'ayant rien à trouver d'ailleurs, avec des chapitres de roman en tête que je ne puis pas écrire!

(IS 202)

It seems that while living in the room on 96th Street—how he paid the rent is unknown—Freddy did little but stew, thinking up writing projects that never came to fruition, bemoaning his lack of a job and of a steady income, wandering the streets, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art which was about a 15-minute walk away, and writing long letters to his friend August Suter, such as the following, dated March 16, 1912:

Mon fidèle Ami! Depuis trois mois que je suis ici, je ne vous ai encore rien raconté. Le premier mois j'ai beaucoup travaillé, beaucoup écrit. Dans la mesure où une femme peut saisir ce qui convient à cet égard, Féla m'a laissé libre de le faire. Mais ensuite je me trouvai de nouveau dans le pétrin, pécuniaire, et je me suis retrouvé encore le plus désespéré des propres à rien. Je ne découvre rien, je ne peux rien faire. Le plus petit cheminement me coûte une peine épouvantable. Je ne puis m'adapter à aucun travail, à aucune occupation. Un emploi ne me dit rien. La moindre démarche me paraît un monde. Je ne puis ni me rendre utile, ni me procurer de l'argent. Je dois aussi apprendre l'anglais et j'ai tant d'autres soucis en tête et dans le cœur . . . Féla a trouvé une place. Nous vivons séparés. Je reste à la maison. Je lis, j'écris . . . Elle l'accepte avec bienveillance mais j'ai l'impression que cela ne saurait se prolonger longtemps.

(IS 205)

Freddy seems to be describing the sort of emotional, spiritual, and even physical paralysis indicative of clinical depression, though it is not my intent to try and diagnose him.

Regardless, thoughts of returning to Paris began to enter his head.

When he wrote Suter again in May, things had not improved, though he did have an idea for an artistic project involving his impressions of America: “Je suis prêt à envoyer des impressions, des films, des aperçus cinématographiques de la vie d’une grande ville américaine” (IS 210). He mentions working on a novel titled *Alea*, something he would never finish. Then he once more details a litany of complaints about his situation, this time adding a bit of local color:

Je me promène beaucoup par ces jours de printemps. Me voyez-vous rentrer le soir, les poches gonflées de coquillages et de morceaux de granit, les souliers crottés par la boue des champs détremés. Je prends le subway et déchiffre péniblement un tome dépareillé du Sutramkana, dont l’épais papier feutré est une caresse aux doigts. J’ai la barbe de 15 jours. Mes cheveux sont un peu trop longs. Mon chapeau est déformé. Mon manteau, une pelure. Tous les corrects Américains que je rencontre à cette heure rentrent de leur bureau, sont esclaffés, abasourdis. L’on s’arrête, l’on rit. L’on me crie quelque chose comme « professeur » ou « Shakespeare », ce qui sont les plus grandes injures ici. Moi, je file, rasant les murs et je pense, tout bas, qu’ils n’ont pas tout à fait tort . . .

(IS 211)

This letter at least shows more concern with the outside world, less navel-gazing and hand-wringing, than his previous journal entries and letters to Suter and others. There's still a degree of self-pity in them, a quality that would be altogether absent from his later work as Blaise Cendrars, but there is at least a hint of sensitivity to something outside himself. What might have changed prior to May?

In 1912, Easter Sunday fell on April 7. Between April 6 and April 8, according to his later telling of events, Freddy Sauser was permanently replaced by Blaise Cendrars. Over the course of these three days, Freddy composed what was to become his first major work, the long, spiritual poems "Les Pâques à New-York," and for the first time signed his name as Blaise Cendrars. He would never sign it any other way again.

On Easter Sunday, the New York Public Library was closed. It was one of Freddy's favorite spots, and he spent many hours reading there, just as he had in the library in St. Petersburg. He perhaps witnessed the Easter Parade on 5th Avenue (Bochner speculates that he did, but Cendrars never mentioned it). Around 8pm, Cendrars says he was on 5th Avenue, where he wandered into the First Presbyterian Church, located between 11th and 12th Streets, in which a performance of Haydn's *Creation* and a sermon by the Reverend Duffield on the theme of "The New World" were taking place. Freddy was enraptured by the music, but the spell was soon broken, and rudely so, by a minister insisting on a donation that Freddy did not have. He was asked to leave. He returned to the room on 96th Street, presumably on foot. In his article "Cendrars *downtown*," Jay Bochner writes that "on peut tracer un itinéraire remarquablement ordonné en suivant l'ordre de présentation des *Pâques*" (51). Whether or not one can match the movements of the poem's speaker to those of the real-life Freddy on the night of Easter Sunday 1912,

or whether the wanderings of the poem's speaker are a more general reflection of Freddy's wanderings throughout the city during his six-month stay in New York City, it is clear that on that Easter night, bereft, broken, and having been ejected from a church service, Freddy hit bottom. "Les Pâques à New-York" was the fruit that hitting bottom bore. From that time forward, there was only Blaise Cendrars.

"Les Pâques à New-York," has been hailed as a landmark of modernist poetry. By October of 1912 it had been published in Paris as a special number of *Les Hommes Nouveaux*, and "we may begin to treat [Cendrars] as one who has found a way more than as one who is still searching" (Bochner 36). By the time he wrote the poem, Cendrars had resided in New York City for just over a year, a period of poverty and uncertainty, but also a period during which he transformed himself. He left New York for Paris only a couple of months after writing the poem, but there is no doubt that "the first city of modernity introduces . . . the poet's first important poem" (*Complete Poems* xv). Jay Bochner, in his essay "Cendrars Downtown," has written that New York is "le lieu et le moment de son premier grand poème et de la creation de son nom" (27).

Aside from its biographical, literary-historical significance, what can we make of "Les Pâques à New-York" itself? Leaving aside the fact that it was written by a man in his mid-twenties, does it stand as a mature work in the Cendrars oeuvre, or does it show hallmarks of juvenilia? In what senses can it be considered an early (or according to some, the first) Modernist poem? In what ways does it function as a critique of America, and in what ways is it an homage to the greatest of American metropolises?

"Les Pâques à New-York" is a beautiful, modern religious poem full of ecstasy and torment. In his "Les Origines de la poésie cubiste," André Malraux wrote that it was

“d’une beauté douloureuse et grave (parfois rimbaldienne)” (42). In 1919, Charles-Henri Hirsch, reviewing “Les Pâques à New-York” for the *Mercure*, said that it is a poem “d’une couleur violente et d’un sens plein qui va sans défaillance. Voilà un des efforts les plus sérieux, une des réalisations poétiques les plus voisines du parfait, que l’on doive à un poète depuis longtemps” (139). And in her multivolume study of Apollinaire’s *Alcools*, Marie-Jeanne Durry saw in “Les Pâques” a sort of centering force, as opposed to the “entremêlement” (intermingling, interweaving) she found vital in Apollinaire:

. . . cette composition de *Pâques*, à la fois centrée, et quoiqu’on ait dit, d’une très forte continuité. Tout concourt, la régularité du battement litannique; la répétition insistante de certains verso ou débuts de vers; la figuration de la Face sans cesse re-surgissante . . .

(273)

It seems that interweaving is just as important to Cendrars as it is to Apollinaire, and his tendency toward intertextuality marks the entire body of his work, though perhaps it is somewhat less evident in “Les Pâques” than it is in his later production. Nevertheless, in “Les Pâques” there is indeed a central image, and that is clearly the figure of Christ—specifically the resurrected Christ as he appears in the modern world, with New York City functioning as the synecdoche for modernity.

The poem opens with two epigraphs, the first in Latin from Fortunatus, from his *Pange lingua*, and the second a French translation by Remy de Gourmont of the same lines, from his *Le Latin mystique*:

Flecte ramos, arbor alta, tensa laxa viscera
 Et rigor lentescat ille quem dedit nativitas
 Ut superni membra Regis miti tendas stipites

Fléchis tes branches, arbre géant, relâche un peu la tension des viscères,
 Et que ta rigueur naturelle s'alentisse,
 N'écartèle pas si rudiment les membres du Roi supérieur . . .

(OC 1: 10)

In Fortunatus, the “lofty tree” is the cross, the second tree ordained by God, following on the Edenic tree from which Adam and Eve ate. The hymn, which Fortunatus wrote in 570, is still used as part of Good Friday Mass in some Catholic churches. Fortunatus’ second tree is, in legend, a literal part of the first, more ancient tree, since it was believed that the cross upon which Jesus was crucified was taken from the wood of the tree which was the source of the fruit of the fall in the Garden of Eden.

Remy de Gourmont was one of Cendrars’ favorite writers and an important touchstone for much of his work, especially for his work that deals with mystical and religious themes, as “Les Pâques à New-York” does. As Cendrars wrote in *Bourlinguer* (1948), no other writer undergirds his own work as much as does Gourmont:

J’aurais pu l’être, mais je n’ai jamais été des intimes de Rémy de Gourmont. Et pourtant, depuis quarante ans, je ne crois pas avoir publié un

livre ou un écrit sans que son nom y figure ou que je ne le cite d'une façon ou d'une autre. C'est dire combien profondément j'ai subi l'emprise du maître que je m'étais choisi à vingt ans. Tout ce que j'ai appris dans les livres c'est à ses livres que je le dois car j'ai lu tous les livres qu'il cite, mais j'ai surtout appris dans la fréquentation de ses propres ouvrages l'usage des mots et le maniement de la langue. Un livre comme *Le Latin mystique* a été pour moi une date, une date de naissance intellectuelle.

(OC 6: 266-7)

One might view Cendrars' relationship with Gourmont, who was almost thirty years older, as having a similarity to the relationship between Henry Miller and Cendrars, though in the latter case Cendrars was only five years older than Miller. Still, Cendrars' account of a memorable meeting with Gourmont, circa 1907, reveals a young man overawed in the presence of his literary hero. Cendrars meets him on the street and they go to the cinema together:

. . . quand je le rencontrai encore une fois sur les quais, je l'abordai franchement et il me suivit au cinéma, place Saint-Michel. Rémy de Gourmont n'avait encore jamais mis les pieds dans un cinéma! On y donnait entre autres choses un documentaire sur les chutes du Zambèze et plus que par les porteurs nègres et les négresses Rémy de Gourmont parut intéressé par une branche d'arbre coincée entre deux pierres qui résistait dans le courant et il me demanda si je croyais que les terribles rapides

finiraient par l'arracher. C'était un enfant. Le surlendemain, c'est lui qui m'entraîna chez lui et je vis la tanière du maître tapissée de livres du haut en bas, sa table furieusement en désordre, une pile de papier blanc à gauche du sous-main où il passait ses nuits à écrire et une pile de papier noirci à la droite. C'était sous les toits, un étroit grenier, pas commode et inconfortable. C'est curieux comme les écrivains ont besoin de se fourrer dans une trappe où ils ne sont pas à l'aise comme pour mieux se contraindre d'écrire et comme pris à leur propre piège, ce qui prouve que l'écriture n'est pas un don naturel mais une longue discipline qui s'acquiert. Tous ceux que j'ai connus étaient logés à la même enseigne et, aujourd'hui, c'est à mon tour de m'être mis à l'étroit. En montant à son septième étage Rémy de Gourmont m'avait demandé de retirer mes chaussures pour ne pas faire de bruit. Il était à peine six heures du soir. Lui-même avait retiré ses souliers de cure et c'est en tapinois que nous pénétrâmes chez lui. Je me demandais s'il avait quelqu'un de malade. Son logis sentait la pharmacie; mais cela sentait aussi le pissat de chat, la valériane ou l'huile de Harlem. Comme chez l'ami Le Rouge j'avais hâte de filer pour aller me rincer la gorge au bistrot du coin. Je lui donnai mon épine d'Ispahan que j'avais apportée pour lui et j'eus à insister pour qu'il l'acceptât. En échange, il me donna un exemplaire de *La Vie des mots* d'Arsène Darmesteter tout rempli d'annotations de sa main. Je sortis confus et j'oubliai de retirer mes chaussures en redescendant. [. . .] Je ne

suis jamais retourné chez Rémy de Gourmont. J'étais trop occupé de mes amours . . . Je ne lui avais pas donné mon nom.

(OC 6: 267-8)

Cendrars' ties to Gourmont are significant for "Les Pâques à New-York" because of the tension in the poem between ancient and modern, sacred and profane. For a young poet of the early 20th century to hearken back to Latin mysticism by way of Gourmont, a literary figure of a prior generation, is somewhat remarkable, but it is even more noteworthy when that poet is Blaise Cendrars, whose later reputation branded him, at turns, as a Dadaist, a Cubist, a Futurist, and more. The fact is that Cendrars never subscribed to any school or movement as a matter of politics or aesthetics. He wrote, and others classified his widely divergent body of work according to the tastes and predilections of the time. Mysticism always held a fascination for him, and that shows clearly in "Les Pâques à New-York," his first truly significant work.

According to Cendrars, as told to Michael Manoll in *Blaise Cendrars vous parle*, the genesis of the poem is this:

Le dimanche de Pâques la bibliothèque était fermée. Fatigué de tourner en rond dans les rues — ou plutôt de tourner en carré, puisque toutes ces rues américaines forment des blocks d'immeubles qui se coupent à angles droits — j'entre le soir dans une église presbytérienne qui donnait un oratorio. La « Création » de Haydn, disait une enseigne lumineuse appendue au clocher. Il y avait dans cette église, d'un côté un public très

clairsemé et, de l'autre, sur une estrade, des jeunes filles du monde qui jouaient sur des instruments anciens et qui chantaient divinement bien. Mais un croquant-évêque interrompaient toutes les cinq minutes l'oratorio pour prêcher je ne sais quelle morale et faire appel au bon cœur des fidèles et, quand l'oratorio reprenait, un autre prêtre-croquant, aussi ennuyeux que le premier, entrait dans la stalle où l'on m'avait installé, pour m'entreprendre en douce et vouloir me convertir, tout en me pelotant le gousset pour en tirer un dollar ou deux pour les frais et me secouant sa bourse de cuir sous le nez. Pauvre de moi! Je sortis avant la fin et rentrai pédestrement chez moi, 67 rue Ouest, absolument dégoûté et fourbu. Il pouvait être deux, trois heures du matin. J'ai rongé un quignon de pain dur et bu un grand verre d'eau. Je me suis couché. Je me suis immédiatement endormi. Je me suis réveillé en sursaut. Je me suis mis à écrire, à écrire. Je me suis rendormi. Je me suis réveillé une deuxième fois en sursaut. J'ai écrit jusqu'au petit jour et je me suis recouché et rendormi pour de bon. Je me suis réveillé à cinq heures du soir. J'ai relu la chose. J'avais pondu *les Pâques à New-York*.

(OC 8: 651)

Jay Bochner, in his article "Cendrars Downtown," writes that the church into which Cendrars wandered that night was the First Presbyterian Church on 5th Avenue between 11th and 12th Streets, and cites an announcement of a presentation of Haydn's "Creation" and a lecture by a Reverend Duffield titled "The New World" at this church in the *New York Times* of April 6, 1912 (50).

Since his arrival in New York City in December 1911, Cendrars had struggled to find work. Most of his time was spent either reading at the main branch of the New York Public Library or wandering the streets of midtown and downtown. As Cendrars notes, the library was closed on Easter Sunday, so he was roaming. “Les Pâques à New-York” is, among other things, a walking poem, a narration of the poet’s peregrinations in the premier modern city.

The poem, which is written in couplets for 204 of its 205 lines (the final line, significantly, stands alone), opens with, fittingly, an invocation of the Passion of Christ:

Seigneur, c’est aujourd’hui le jour de votre Nom,
 J’ai lu dans un vieux livre la geste de votre Passion,

 Et votre angoisse et vos efforts et vos bonnes paroles
 Qui pleurent dans le livre, doucement monotones.

(CP 229)

The poem announces itself immediately as one dealing with Christian themes, something that is perhaps surprising coming from a young poet of the time who aspired to the avant-garde. This will not be a conventionally Christian poem, however, as soon becomes evident. The poem takes the form of a direct appeal to Christ, using the second-person form of address throughout.

Cendrars writes of a monk who tells the poet about the death of Christ, and who writes the Gospels “avec des lettres d’or” in a missal balanced on his knees. The monk is

sheltered in a cloister and works with intense concentration and devotion, so much so that “Les heures s’arrêtaient au seuil de son retrait. / Lui, s’oubliait, penché sur votre portrait.” The monk is so absorbed in his work that when the Vespers bells chime, he cannot locate their origin: “Le bon frère ne savait si c’était son amour / Ou si c’était le Vôtre, Seigneur, ou votre Père / Qui battait à grands coups les portes du monastère” (229-30). A shift then occurs, and we are no longer in a monastic cloister, but in a shabby, rented room in New York City instead. The poet is alone, but he can sense someone nearby, though he is unable or unwilling to communicate with whomever is there: “Je suis comme ce bon moine, ce soir, je suis inquiet. / Dans la chambre à côté, un être triste et muet / Attend derrière la porte, attend que je l’appelle! / C’est Vous, c’est Dieu, c’est moi, — c’est l’Eternel.” The sense of alienation and inaction is keen. The poet confesses that when he was a child, he did not know how to pray, and that today he knows Christ no more than he did then. The wall between the speaker and the Christ-presence in the room next door seems impenetrable, even though there’s something there that’s waiting on him, that’s waiting on him to call. The poet cannot bridge the short distance to the room beside him, cannot breach even so much as the flimsy wall of the boardinghouse room.

He can, however, walk with Christ in the streets. In the open air, the poet finds himself freed: “Je connais tous les Christs qui pendent dans les musées; / Mais vous marchez, Seigneur, ce soir à mes côtés.” The static Christs hanging in museums are no longer sufficient, no longer a source of consolation, and are, for the poet, all too knowable. He requires a Christ beyond his own imagining, and he cannot find such a Christ enclosed within museum walls. Instead, he seeks and finds Him in the street.

Leaving his lonely room, the poet walks the city: “Je descends à grands pas vers le bas de la ville, / Le dos voûté, le cœur ride, l’esprit fébrile.” As he rambles, the city sights take on a highly spiritual, Gospel-like significance. He sees apartment windows “pleines de sang” and the women in those windows “sont comme des fleurs de sang,” orchids which in turn are compared to “Calices renversés ouverts sous vos trois plaies.” Yet the women in the windows are decidedly secular, since “Votre sang recueilli, elles ne l’ont jamais bu. / Elles ont du rouge aux lèvres et des dentelles au cul.” Orchids aren’t the only blooms the poet observes at the beginning of his walk. There are also “Les fleurs de la Passion” that are white as church candles, “les plus douce fleurs au Jardin de la Bonne Vierge.”

The poet enters into a temporal alignment with Christ, or at least with the story of Christ’s passion as related in the synoptic gospels, when he notes that “C’est à cette heure-ci, c’est vers la neuvième heure / Que votre Tête, Seigneur, tomba sur votre Cœur” (230). This connection is one of clock-time only, however, since the poet then recalls paintings, reliquaries, and actual relics, in particular the veil of Saint Veronica on which the face of Christ is supposedly imprinted, none of which seem to draw him any closer to the peace he seeks: “Peut-être que la foi me manqué, Seigneur, et la bonté / Pour voir ce rayonnement de votre Beauté.” But even though he cannot “see” these sorts of representations of Christ, he can (and does) have a more visceral, direct experience of Christ as he continues his “périlleux voyage” through the metropolis. Closing this section of the poem, and anticipating its ending, he writes “Je suis triste et malade. Peut-être à cause de Vous / Peut-être à cause d’un autre, peut-être à cause de Vous.”

The poet's wanderings indeed become perilous as he walks through poorer and poorer parts of the city where "la foule des pauvres pour qui vous fites le Sacrifice" are crammed together like cattle. He notes the docks, where immigrants from all over the world are deposited, "des Italiens, des Grecs, des Espagnols, / des Russes, des Bulgares, des Persans, des Mongols," and compares these masses of the poor to "des bêtes de cirque qui sautent les méridiens." A recent arrival himself, the poet registers a plea: "Seigneur, ayez pitié des peuples en souffrance" (231). This single line might be seen to crystallize "Les Pâques à New-York," which is fundamentally an extended admission of human powerlessness in the face of deprivation and suffering, and a likewise extended prayer for grace and mercy to be visited upon those who are victimized by the cruel workings of the modern city, including but not limited to the poet himself.

Entering a Jewish quarter, the poet recalls how "Rembrandt aimait beaucoup les peindre dans leurs défroques," then alludes to his own poverty by writing "Moi, j'ai, ce soir, marchandé un microscope." The allusion isn't merely to personal poverty, however; by invoking Rembrandt (1606 – 1669) and, implied by his mention of a microscope, the inventor of the microscope, van Leeuwenhoek (1632 – 1723), Cendrars is also making a distinction between the pre-Enlightenment, Baroque world and the world of science. The distinction doesn't necessarily favor the Enlightenment; after all, the poet lives and breathes in a world shaped by science and technology and ideas of social and economic progress, yet due to his poverty he pawns a microscope. Clearly, progress is not for all, and specifically not for him. In Rembrandt's hands, the cast-off clothes of Jews are transformed into great art, but in the very real New York City of 1912, poverty signifies a failure of the modern scheme, a poverty of body and spirit alike.

How else have the figures of the past, specifically the pre-modern past, been transformed by Gotham? “Seigneur, les humbles femmes qui vous accompagnèrent à Golgotha / Se cachent. Au fond des bouges, sur immondes sofas, // Elles sont polluées par la misère des hommes. / Des chiens leur ont rongé les os, et dans le rhum // Elles cachent leur vice endurci qui s’écaille.” Mary Magdalene may have been a prostitute, but for the poet she was not nearly as wretched as the broken, exploited women he sees on his night walk. Yet the failure is not only on the part of the women, or of the city, or of modernity itself; it is equally the poet’s failure, his inability to love others as Christ loves him: “Je voudrais être Vous pour aimer les prostituées. / Seigneur, ayez pitié des prostituées.”

From the Jewish quarter, the poet ventures into a neighborhood of vagrants and thieves. He thinks of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus and knows that Christ would smile on their misfortune. He encounters an old robber who speaks like a philosopher, and gives him what little he has: “Je lui ai donné de l’opium pour qu’il aille plus vite en paradis.” He thinks of the street singers, the blind violinists, the one-armed organ grinder (Cendrars himself would lose his right arm in combat during the First World War), and the girl in a straw hat singing and peddling paper roses. Of these city dwellers, he writes “Je sais que ce sont eux qui chantent durant l’éternité.” He implores God to watch over these suffering souls, to give them just a little something: “Seigneur, faites-leur l’aumône, autre que de la lueur des becs de gaz, / Seigneur, faites-leur l’aumône de gros sous ici-bas” (232).

This section of “Les Pâques à New-York,” which treats the poet’s nocturnal wanderings around the metropolis, is in the spirit of the Beatitudes of the Gospels, being

a call for mercy upon the downtrodden. The section is, however, a distinctly modern version of those well-known Biblical aphorisms, placing those who suffer in a decidedly urban, twentieth-century setting. The best-known beatitudes, those found in the book of Matthew, are certainly relevant to Cendrars' poem, but there is perhaps a more direct connection with the beatitudes from Mark, from the so-called "Sermon on the Plain," found in chapter 6, verses 20 to 22. They read:

Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.

Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

In "Les Pâques à New-York" there is a persistent call for mercy upon the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and the despised. Given its temporal and aesthetic context, however, the poem offers a modern take on this ancient wisdom, tying human suffering into the dominant economic and social systems of early 20th-century New York City.

Further along in the poem, Cendrars explicitly juxtaposes the ancient and the modern, showing that what once was sacred has now become quotidian and even profane:

La rue est dans la nuit comme une déchirure,

Pleine d'or et de sang, de feu et d'épluchures.

Ceux que vous aviez chassé du temple avec votre fouet,
 Flagellent les passants d'une poignée de méfaits

L'Etoile qui disparut alors du tabernacle,
 Brûle sur les murs dans la lumière crue des spectacles.

Seigneur, la Banque illuminée est comme un coffre-fort,
 Où s'est coagulé le Sang de votre mort.

(CP 233)

The money lenders, once chased from the temple, have now entered the street, where they flog passers-by with the very lash that was once used against them. The instrument of justice becomes the tool of injustice. The tabernacle star is no longer in a holy place, but instead hangs in public spaces as advertising. Instead of illuminated manuscripts of the medieval world, the poet sees an illuminated bank, inside which the blood of Christ coagulates. In another poem, "Le Panama ou Les Aventures de Mes Sept Oncles," Cendrars writes that "les bulletins de la Bourse [sont] notre prière quotidienne" (CP, 246). The sense is much the same here. The sacred blood of Christ has become profane capital. Biblical signs and symbols have been profaned in service of progress.

The poet wanders further. The shadows cast by the enormous buildings scare him. Someone is following him in the street, but he dares not look. His pursuer walks with a limping step. The poet stops deliberately, and his frightening stalker shoots him a sharp

look, then limps on by, “comme un poignard.” Commenting yet again on the ways in which the modern world has twisted the good news of Christ, Cendrars writes “Seigneur, rien n’a changé depuis que vous n’êtes plus Roi. / Le Mal s’est fait une béquille de votre Croix” (233).

Now the poet is far downtown, in Chinatown. He stops for tea and contemplates the “curieux chromos” on the wall in bamboo frames. He thinks of the famous Japanese artist Hokusai and imagines Christ painted in an Asian style: “Je vous voyais en raccourci dans votre martyre. // Mais le peintre, pourtant, aurait peint votre tourment / Avec plus de cruauté que nos peintres d’Occident” (233). He then imagines complex torments that make the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans look simple, complete with flames blown into lungs, impaling, and nerves ripped out by pincers. Are these torments mere Orientalism on Cendrars’ part, a concession to the stereotype of the inventive cruelties of Asian tortures? In part, yes — “Les Pâques à New-York” is a poem written by a young man, after all, a product of a poet just finding his way, the creation of a writer subject to the biases and constructs of the culture in which he walks, which he is perhaps only just learning to profitably critique — and yet it seems that there is something going on in these lines other than mere cliché. I suggest that Cendrars’ imagining of the face of Christ as depicted by Hokusai is a nod to the Perennial Tradition, a mode of spiritual thought that asserts that each of the world’s religions shares a single metaphysical truth and origin. Perennialism has its roots in the Renaissance with Marcilio Ficino (1433-1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), and Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), each of whom argued that universal truth is the same in each of the world’s religions. In the nineteenth century, Perennialism was carried forward by Ralph Waldo Emerson and

others. In the twentieth century, the Perennial Tradition was popularized by Aldous Huxley's book of the same name, which was first published in 1945. Perennialism is by necessity comparative, and takes religious orthodoxies out of their culturally-specific contexts to reveal metaphysical Truth. In seeing the suffering of Jesus on the cross in an altogether unfamiliar context, Cendrars is commenting on the universal nature of suffering and grace.

There is yet another reason why Cendrars dwells on the intricate tortures his imagined Chinese might inflict upon Christ. According to Jay Bochner, in his "Cendrars Downtown," it is in this section that "le poème atteint son moment culminant d'écartèlement annoncé dès le début dans l'épigraphe de Fortunat et poursuivi psychiquement chez les peuplades du monde sous le nouveau joug de l'argent" (57). Sophisticated, cunning torments visited on the body of Christ become a stand-in for the equally complex, sinister depredations wrought upon human bodies by the metropolis itself, primarily via economic means. Bochner continues:

Les peintres d'Occident sont censés être plus délicats, plus civilisés dans les tortures qu'ils auraient osé infliger au Christ, mais Cendrars choisit, à la fin, la brutalité explicite car il est porté aux extrêmes de la ville qui lui dictent les siens: les hauteurs et les bas-fonds, les bruits de la construction et de la destruction, les lumières de la nuit abolie, la misère qui nourrit les trusts, les églises et les banques qui font leur publicité aux bougres qui cherchent au bout du monde.

...

Extrémité de cette ville qui déborde la civilité, extrémité de cette
conscience en quête d'équivalent à la modernité.

(58)

On this view, Cendrars' imagining of Asian tortures is less a sort of naïve Orientalism (though I believe there's an element of that in the young poet's production too) than it is an extended metaphor concerning the ways in which the modern city perpetrates cunning and baffling cruelties on its most vulnerable inhabitants.

The poem's next stanza is a lament for what's been lost in modernity, for what's eradicated by capital and progress. In the city where there are no bells,

Je pense aux cloches tues:—où sont les cloches anciennes?

Où les litanies et les douces antiennes?

Où sont les longs offices et où les beaux cantiques?

Où sont les liturgies et les musiques?

Où sont tes fiers prélats, Seigneur, où tes nonnains?

Où l'aube blanche, l'amict des Saintes et des Saintes?

La joie du Paradis se noie dans la poussière,

Les feux mystiques ne rutilent plus dans les verrières.

(CP 234)

For the poet, and for the multitudes of poor people he encounters in the street, the consolation available in former times is available no longer. The promise of economic success is offered to them instead, but that offer is empty, more of a con than a genuine hope.

If the rituals of old have gone away and the promise of modernity is hollow, then what persists? Dawn, shadows, and crucifixion: “L’aube tarde à venir, et dans le bouge étroit / Des ombres crucifiées agonisent aux parois.” A look into a mirror shows a “Golgotha de nuit” instead of a normal human reflection. Who gazes in the mirror, Christ or the poet himself? What’s reflected there is an undifferentiated mass of flickering red and black. Smoke marbles in lamplight and winds itself around the figure in front of the mirror, an evanescent winding sheet, “un linge déteint.” The lamp hanging from the ceiling is compared to the head of Christ, “comme votre Tête, triste et morte et exsangue.” The entire room, then, the poet’s lonely, shabby room, becomes a Christ-space, perhaps the crucified body of Christ itself, with the poet inside. Since the rituals of antiquity are no longer available, in order to connect with Christ, the poet must inhabit Christ, must in a sense become Christ. As Jesus says in John 14:20, “you are in me and I am in you.” Yet in the room of flickering shadows the poet cannot fully inhabit Christ and must remain fundamentally human, gripped by fear and sorrow, sad to be so sad: “Des reflets insolites palpitent sur les vitres . . . / J’ai peur, —et je suis triste, Seigneur, d’être si triste” (CP 234).

The next stanza, comprising only six lines, is a departure from the rest of the poem. It is arranged as a call and response, the “call” lines taken from the *Victimae paschali laudis* used in the Roman Catholic Easter Mass and dating from the 11th century:

“*Dic nobis, Maria, quid vidisti in via?*”

—La lumière frissonner, humble dans la matin.

“*Dic nobis, Maria, quid vidisti in via?*”

—Des blancheurs éperdues palpiter comme des mains.

“*Dic nobis, Maria, quid vidisti in via?*”

—L’augure du printemps tressaillir dans mon sein.

(CP 235)

Though the question is posed to Mary (three times), the poet himself has also been “in via” for much of the poem. Is it Mary or the poet who answers? As with the poet and the figure of Christ, the two are to a large degree conflated. The three answers, all to the same question, touch on eternal verities and the recurring cycle of the seasons and of death and resurrection. The morning light, significant as a recurring phenomenon, is humble, and shivers like some newborn thing. The whiteness, symbolic not only of purity but also of absence, of the void, is compared to quivering hands; useful, functional, all-too-human flesh emerges from the blank slate of creation (in later years, after suffering the combat-related amputation of his right hand and arm, Cendrars would customarily

close his letters with the phrase “Ma main amie”). Spring, the season most obviously associated with Easter, resurrection, and new hope, gives the poet a start. He feels the thrill of springtime in his breast. Aside from the symbolic associations evident in this stanza, it is also clear that after his nocturnal wanderings, the poet has made it through to the dawn of a new day. Though he saw none of these things on his night ramble, these are his answers to the thrice-repeated question. What he saw was far more ominous and oppressive, and yet what he reports in the light of day is altogether otherwise.

But the relatively hopeful spirit of the replies of the “Mary stanza” don’t last; in fact, the very next stanza shows the city as it really is, revealed in the full light of day:

Seigneur, l’aube a glissé froide comme un suaire

Et a mis tout à nu les gratte-ciel dans les airs.

Déjà un bruit immense retentit sur la ville.

Déjà les trains bondissent, grondent et défilent.

Les métropolitains roulent et tonnent sous terre.

Les ponts sont secoués par les chemins de fer.

La cité tremble. Des cris, du feu et des fumées,

Des sirènes à vapeur rauquent comme des huées.

Une foule enfiévrée pars les sueurs de l'or
 Se bouscule et s'engouffre dans les longs corridors.

Trouble, dans le fouillis empanaché des toits,
 Le soleil, c'est votre Face souillée par les crachats.

(CP 235)

How quickly the day is profaned by the city's clamor, by the rush of workers heading to jobs at which they may barely earn their daily bread! No longer is the morning light humble, no longer is the spring day an augury of hope and life sustained. The city transforms from the sacred quiet of dawn, experienced for only moments, into a veritable riot of activity. Entering the skyscrapers in which they toil, people are engulfed and vanish down long corridors. The sun dims, obscured by a jumble of rooftops, and no longer appears as a harbinger of hope, but instead is compared to the face of Christ, spit upon by the crowd in the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas, as in Matthew 26:67.

The poet, unemployed and impoverished (as was Cendrars during his months in New York City), returns to his room tired, alone, and dejected. He writes that "Ma chambre est nue comme un tombeau . . .," suggesting another empty tomb in another place and time. He closes his eyes and his teeth chatter from the cold. He calls out the name of Christ. Suddenly, profound disequilibrium: "Cent mille toupies tournoient devant mes yeux . . . / Non, cent mille femmes . . . Non, cent mille violoncelles . . ." He thinks about his misery and thinks about his past, about all the time he's spent wandering,

about the incessant roaming that has brought him to this very moment in this very room in this very city on this very day. He thinks.

Then the poem ends abruptly, more from fatigue and surrender than from design. The poet cannot even manage to sustain the coupled lines that he's employed throughout the rest of the poem, and thus concludes with a single line, the only such solo line in the entire work: "Je ne pense plus à Vous. Je ne pense plus à Vous" (235). By its repetition, this single line is, in a sense, doubled, but the repetition is more than a merely stylistic move. Its use of the negative construction, "ne pense plus," is ironic, since Christ is all the poet is thinking about at this point. The poet perhaps protests too much. The more he tries not to think of Christ, the more he thinks of Christ. The line's repetition turns it into a sort of incantation, an appeal (though phrased in the negative) to Christ for some sort of redemption. Redemption from what? From the city, its depredations, all that he has witnessed on the streets during one long night and the following morning. Because the poet seeks redemption from all these things, and because these things are precisely what make up the body of the poem itself through its first two hundred and four lines (of the total two hundred and five), it is the poem itself, his poem, from which the poet seeks redemption, amelioration, or outright escape. The "You" which the poet insists he is no longer going to think about could just as well be his own poem as it could be Christ. He insists he is going to stop thinking about the poem, and the poem gives out, the poet announcing his own poem's limit.

"Les Pâques à New-York" is a significant work not only as an early example of Modernism, but also because it marks the first publication by Blaise Cendrars. Of particular importance for this study, it documents young Freddy Sauser's first experience

of America and the birth of the nom de plume he would use for the rest of his life, Blaise Cendrars. As Patrice Delbourg writes in his book *L'odyssée Cendrars*, "C'est l'un des grands flux du lyrisme français en vers libres, où se rejoignent latinité médiévale et avant-garde poétique" (198). In the case of Cendrars, this joining of the medieval with the avant-garde was precipitated directly by his encounter with the city of New York over a six- or seven-month period of 1912.

What does the poem say about America, and how does it anticipate Cendrars' later writings on the country? Many of the themes found elsewhere in Cendrars' oeuvre, most notably in his 1925 novel *L'Or*, occur first in "Les Pâques à New-York": America as a paragon of modernity, with its attendant and paradoxical ills; progress as illusion; the ravages of unchecked capitalism; the violence of its origins and the continuing potency of violence in America up to the present day; avarice, slavery, and the hypocrisy of welcoming immigrants to the "land of the free" only to grind them down under the weight of poverty and prejudice. Bochner compares Cendrars' take on America to that of a famous native-born orator of the late nineteenth century, William Jennings Bryan:

Cette tension entre l'Amérique âpre au gain et celle qui rêve de liberté existait déjà depuis des années, et on la trouve notamment dans le plus célèbre discours de Bryan (prononcé en 1896) qui se termine avec une image qui rappelle l'idée centrale d'un Christ torturé dans *Les Pâques*: "Vous n'enfoncerez pas cette couronne d'épine sur le front du labeur, vous ne crucifierez pas l'humanité sur un croix d'or." Dans cette perspective on peut voir que le poème n'est pas écrit du dehors, mais bien de l'intérieur

de l'expérience américaine, celle qui, minoritaire, dominera une grande partie de la littérature à venir.

(Downtown 42)

Bochner's claim that Cendrars' poem is written from the inside of the American experience is both remarkable and true; remarkable since, after all, "Les Pâques à New-York" is a poem written in French by a young man of Swiss origin who had only been in America for a few months when the poem was written, and true because the poem itself bears out the claim. For all of its religious and even mystical content, "Les Pâques à New-York" is fundamentally a poem concerning the ways in which the promise and hope of an idealized America is crushed under the weight of avarice and prejudice and how the good news of Christ is crucified by day and by night in the streets of the nation's greatest metropolis.

Freddy's New York journals contain some other items of interest, especially regarding Blaise Cendrars' writings on America. On May 21, there is a series of aphoristic one-liners. "Je quitte l'Amérique comme j'y suis arrivé: le cœur ivre d'un amour impossible," he wrote. Then he adds, somewhat cryptically, "Premier et dernier mot de New York: Hunyadi. Janos Constipation." Hunyadi Janos, in addition to being a Hungarian national hero known for battling the Ottomans in the 15th century, was also a mineral water marketed for aiding constipation that was sold in the United States as late as the 1920s. The company's advertisements, featuring a portrait of Hunyadi, were commonly found in metropolitan areas including New York. Did Cendrars see such an

advertisement upon arriving in New York, and then again upon leaving? Is he attempting a clever comment about how he both arrived and departed New York in need of a constipation remedy, perhaps saying that his trip to the New World did not cure what ailed him? Regardless of the meaning of the brief inclusion of Hunyadi Janos in his journal, the significance of noticing commercial advertising and using it as fodder for art and commentary was new for Cendrars, and relatively new for art and literature. Cendrars would continue using advertising and other “non-artistic,” found materials in his work, particularly in “Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles” (1914). The inclusion of advertising materials would become a hallmark of the Modernists; F. Scott Fitzgerald’s T.J. Eckleberg billboard comes to mind, as does Wallace Stevens’ comment, included in his *Opus Posthumous* (1989) that the modern romantic poet is one for whom “life would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider’s Catsup, Ivory Soap, and Chevrolet Cars” (253). Dadaists, Futurists, Surrealists, and others would likewise employ advertising, often in the mutilated form of collage and cut-up, to their own ends. Perhaps Cendrars’ brief inclusion of Hunyadi Janos mineral water in his journal shows prescience in this regard.

The last note Cendrars wrote prior to his departure from New York reads “Je tourne dans les méridiens comme un écureuil dans sa cage. Admirez-vous mon adresse?” This line, slightly modified to “Je tourne dans les méridiens comme un écureuil dans la sienne,” was included in the long poem “Panama,” published two years after the journal entry, and became one of Cendrars’ hallmark phrases. Thus, Freddy had become Blaise

Cendrars not simply in name only, by merely changing his signature, but for the first time was writing like the Cendrars the world would come to know.

There is one last inclusion in the New York notebooks, the fascinating short prose piece titled “New York in Flashlight.” Though the text is written in French, the title is given in English. Its date of composition is uncertain. Its placement at the end of the New York notebook suggests that it was composed while Cendrars was aboard ship and on his way back to Europe. In any case, it’s a piece noteworthy for its modernism as well as for its lack of self-pity, a negative trait that had characterized much of Freddy Sauser’s writing. As Miriam Cendrars puts it, “New York in Flashlight” announces a formidable conversion (BC 321). It is, in every sense, a Cendrars piece rather than a Freddy piece.

“J’ai été en traitement chez un cinématographe,” it begins. “Depuis lors je me suis procuré un appareil. J’emploie souvent. Surtout le soir, quand j’ai vainement peiné sur un poème et que les rimes ne viennent pas” (IS 238-9). Already, the piece feels different than anything that has come in Freddy’s various notebooks before; more adventurous, more imaginative, outward-looking (literally, due to the camera’s lens, but figuratively as well) instead of soul-searching. It continues:

L’appareil crépite. Le film ronronne. Les images pleuvent. Le cerveau se gonfle à la pluie. Les nerfs se détendent. Le cœur s’apaise. Les scènes défilent, me cinglent, comme les flagelles glacés des douches. La vulgarité de la vie quotidienne me régénère. Je ne poursuis plus de chimères. Je ne rêve pas. Pas de métaphysique. Pas d’abstraction. Les mâchoires se décrochent. Je ris, en équilibre dans un fauteuil. Pour cinq sous! C’est mon

hygiène d'homme-de-lettres trop aigri. Le cinématographe est mon hydrothérapie.

(IS 239)

Not only has the introspective, embittered Freddy been transformed into the expansive, compassionate Blaise Cendrars, but he has done so by way of the camera itself, the apparatus and the way it allows him to look at the world. The effect is positively therapeutic. While aboard the *Birma*, on his crossing of the Atlantic from Libau to New York, Freddy had viewed his fellow passengers as ludicrous and pitiable. By the time he crosses the ocean again, in the opposite direction, he's able to say that the vulgarity of people's daily lives invigorates him.

The remarkable "New York in Flashlight" continues:

J'aime aussi beaucoup les métropolitains et les chemins de fer suspendus. Surtout ceux de New York, car ils sont mal bâtis et il y arrive beaucoup d'accidents. Les express fusent. Les roues tournent. Les ressorts grincent. Un rythme heurté, impair, m'emporte. Je bois de la vitesse, cette absinthe de tout le corps. Quand je suis ivre, le train s'arrête. Et mes excès ne vont pas plus loin.

(IS 239)

This is perhaps Cendrars' earliest paean to modernity, to the innovations (and mayhem) of modern transportation technology. He describes getting drunk on speed and force, something many later authors, including Jack Kerouac, could empathize with.

Next, he writes of another means of recording, this time registering sound instead of sight:

Je me suis aussi acheté un gramophone. C'est par épargne. J'y enregistre sur les disques sympathiques le parler des gens qui dialoguent dans la rue. Je n'ai plus aucun frais d'imagination. Mes romans sont dictés par une machine parlante qui, parfois, hausse la voix et hurle l'en-tête redondante d'un journal. Elle me fait de la réclame. J'ai beaucoup de lecteurs.

(IS 239)

In the scenario Cendrars imagines, he, the ostensible author, is no longer the source of artistic creation, but instead is an operator of a device that records the chatter of the masses and even provokes responses from them. He no longer has any imagination, but is instead simply a conduit, a technician. What a change this is from the romantic ideal, from young Freddy and his passion for Nerval and Baudelaire and Rimbaud!

Out of money, and with his relationship with Féla strained, Freddy left America on June 6, 1912, aboard the steamer *Voltorno*, on which he could only afford a third-class ticket. Just over a year later, on October 9, 1913, there was a terrible explosion aboard the ship which disabled it and ultimately resulted in its sinking on October 18. The disaster at sea resulted in the deaths of 136 men, women, and children. But by this time, Freddy was safely ashore in Europe, having disembarked at Rotterdam and made his way to Paris, where he had arrived by July 14.

In Paris, he had the good fortune of being able to stay in the spacious apartments of the American painter Richard Hall, whose daughter Agnès was married to Freddy's brother Georges, at 40 rue Lauriston. Hall was traveling, so Freddy had the apartments to himself. It was here that he finalized his draft of "Les Pâques à New-York," and soon after he did, he mailed a copy to Apollinaire, with whose work he had recently familiarized himself (especially Apollinaire's criticism which was then being published in *l'Intransigeant*, as well as his comic, obscene novel titled *les Onze Mille Verges*, which had been published in 1907).

Having spent most of July and August alone in the apartments at rue Lauriston, generally feeling sorry for himself and staying out of the stifling heat, Freddy finally began to venture forth in late August. On August 20, according to Miriam Cendrars, he walked to the rue Cujas in the Latin Quarter, where in a café he ran into some old friends, most notably Emil Szittyá, whom he had previously known in Germany. The Hungarian Szittyá had already published two series of his literary and artistic review *Neue Menschen*. Jed Rasula, in his 2015 study of Dada, *Destruction Was My Beatrice*, describes Szittyá as "a peripheral participant in the Zurich scene" (224), but during 1912 and 1913 he was more than a peripheral figure for Cendrars. At the café on rue Cujas the two drank and talked, and by evening's end had decided to relaunch *Neue Menschen* from Paris, changing the title to *les Hommes Nouveaux*. Fifty years later, in a special issue of *Le Mercure de France* devoted to Blaise Cendrars, Emil Szittyá recalled their aims for the publication:

Les Hommes Nouveaux furent fondés par moi et quelques anarchistes. Nous n'avions pas un sou. Pour s'en sortir, nous louâmes une salle au Palais-Royale pour y installer une guinguette. Le chansonnier Charles d'Avray venait y chanter. Nous vendions nous-mêmes les billets d'entrée dans les cercles anarchistes et aux petites filles du Boul'Mich'. (Le Montparnasse n'était pas encore en vogue.) Nous obtenions ainsi assez d'argent pour se saouler et pour éditer le premier numéro de notre revue. Le deuxième numéro fut imprimé par nous-mêmes, grâce à un idéaliste qui nous avait acheté une petite imprimerie. Un jour, dans la mistoufle la plus complète, nous vendîmes le matériel de l'imprimerie pour bouffer. Et pour le troisième numéro, nous nous mîmes à la recherche d'un nouvel idéaliste. Cendrars se passionnait pour notre entreprise et il fit de notre revue une entreprise purement littéraire.

(BC 332)

Though Szittyá mentions three separate issues, there is no evidence that the second and third were ever actually produced. Despite its founding among the anarchists, Cendrars' aims for the review were not political, as Szittyá's words attest. He was interested in a purely literary pursuit, and Miriam Cendrars asserts that his primary aim with *les Hommes Nouveaux* was the establishment of a home for his own writings, the publication of a journal through which his name and his work could become better known.

By September 1912, Richard Hall had returned to Paris, and Blaise was forced to vacate the premises on rue Lauriston, and not without some embarrassment. Hall's

servants had reported to him parties hosted by Cendrars, and at least one occasion on which he had invited a street person to stay there with him. Such activities were not condoned in the posh world of rue Lauriston, and Hall's propriety was offended.

In a letter to August Suter dated August 31, Cendrars complains about his loneliness and poverty, a typical refrain. He assures Suter of his abiding affection for him, "le seul homme avec lequel je me sens à l'unisson" (IS 265). Then, in a short postscript, he writes: "J'ai lu avec le plus grand intérêt le petit livre. Quel grand destin a été celui de votre grand-père! Un homme ruiné par la découverte de l'or! Magnifique! Magnifique! Magnifique!" (IS 265). This grandfather of Suter's, the man who was ruined by the discovery of gold on his land, was none other than Johann August Suter, whose "marvelous history" Cendrars would write in his debut novel, *L'Or*, published in 1925. The "petit livre" Suter sent Cendrars in 1912 was an obscure text titled *General Joh. Aug. Suter*, authored by Martin Birmann, and published in Switzerland in 1868.

In late 1912, Szittyta took Cendrars to a Parisian artists' colony called La Ruche (The Hive), located in the passage de Dantzig, near the Vaugirard abattoirs in the 15th arrondissement. The colony had been established in 1902 by the sculptor Alfred Boucher. Working and living there at the time of Cendrars' visit were Amedeo Modigliani, Fernand Léger, Constantin Brancusi, and Marc Chagall. It was Chagall in particular whom Szittyta wanted Cendrars to meet, and meet they did. Chagall described their initial encounter:

Cendrars avait fait irruption en riant, avec toute sa jeunesse débordante.
Comme je parlais mal le français, il me parla en russe. Il donnait

l'impression de se fondre: ses yeux, toute sa figure, ses paroles. Il ne regardait pas mes tableaux, il les avala. Et c'est devenu un amour, une amitié de frères. A cette époque, quand montait le cubisme, avec Apollinaire en tête, l'amitié de Cendrars fut pour moi un encouragement.

(BC 338)

Cendrars, being allied with no aesthetic school in particular, could take Chagall's paintings as they were, without reference to some outside code or program (Cubism, in this case, as Chagall mentions). In Chagall's work, Cendrars saw immediately the inspiration of the painter's troubled and even traumatic childhood in the shtetl near Vitebsk, Russia (now Belarus), where he had been born and raised. For Blaise, Chagall's paintings were a true expression of the Russian soul, in particular of the Jewish-Russian soul. He assured the painter that following the guidance of his own vision was crucial, and urged him not to succumb to the trends and tastes of the moment which, after all, were fleeting:

Blaise Cendrars me persuadait que je pouvais travailler à côté des cubistes orgueilleux pour qui j'étais peut-être un rien du tout. Ils ne me gênaient pas. Je les regardais de côté et pensais: qu'ils mangent à leur faim leurs poires carrées sur leurs tables rectangulaires.

(BC 339)

Throughout his literary career, Cendrars would follow his own advice to Chagall, working to the side of others who were readily identified with this movement or that school, but never really subscribing to any movement or school himself. Like Chagall, Cendrars would always seem *sui generis*.

Though in 1912 Cendrars had not yet met Guillaume Apollinaire in person, the writer and critic, seven years his senior, loomed large in influence on Cendrars. He had already mailed the typescript of “Les Pâques à New-York” to Apollinaire in July, but by mid-September had not received a response. On the afternoon of September 16, Cendrars was browsing in a bookshop in the place du Palais-Royale when he spotted a volume by Apollinaire, *l’Hérésiarque*. The book had been published in 1910, and he had wanted his own copy since then. Buying the book was out of the question – in addition to his general penury, earlier that day he had spent his last few francs on lunch with Chagall. Blaise thumbed through the book, then slipped it into his vest pocket when he thought he was unobserved. The shopkeeper saw him, however, and he was promptly detained on the street and arrested. His journal entry from September 17 describes the experience:

A 2 heures, je vole un livre. Arrêté. Interrogatoire. Poste. Murs humides, inscription: cœur humain. L’Amour. Le goguenot se vide comme dans mon cœur la rage. Grande impression de repos. Je m’accroupis. Belles pensées. Désir d’y rester. Calme, calme, calme.

2 camelots. Paris vu d’une voiture cellulaire. Dépôt. Fouille. Inscription.

Un cafard comme une étoile au plafond. *Silence!* En cellule 8 à 10 h 30.

Argent 2316, 2 fenêtres (...), lit, paillasse, couverture, pot, broc, tasse étain, cuvette, tabouret enchaîne, éclairage électrique, 2 fenêtres, table — mur jaune et brun. Horreur: water-closet, électricité. Parquet. Propre, reluisant. Petite chambre d'hôpital.

(IS 266-7)

His telegraphic style in this and other brief writings made in jail (and almost sixty years later reproduced in the volume *Inédits secrets*) is due not to some conscious aesthetic decision, but to the fact that all he had to write on was an envelope. Among the almost illegible scrawling on that envelope is the phrase “Écrire à: G.A.” It seems that Cendrars was addressing his jailhouse musings to Apollinaire, the very man whose book he had been arrested for attempting to steal. Not only this, but he also managed to procure one sheet of paper and an additional envelope from the prison authorities, which he used to write an actual letter to Apollinaire:

Monsieur Guillaume APOLLINAIRE

Homme de Lettres

Auteuil

10, rue La Fontaine

Paris, le 17 septembre 1912.

Monsieur,

« L'Hérésiarque » m'a séduit. J'ai voulu empocher le volume à l'étalage de la librairie Stock. Je me suis fait arrêter. Me voici en cellule au Dépôt! Veuillez je vous prie faire quelque chose pour moi — désintéresser Stock. Je suis l'auteur de « Pâques à New York », Blaise Cendrars, le poème que je vous ai fait parvenir dernièrement. Venez me voir si vous le voulez bien.

Très respectueusement

Frédéric Sauser

Cellule 8

au Dépôt

(IS 269)

This letter, a fan letter to be sure, was never sent, and was still in Blaise's possession when he was released from jail a few days later. He still had no indication that Apollinaire had read "Les Pâques," or that he knew who Blaise was at all. That would soon change.

Out of jail, and working with Szittyta and others to get the first issue of *les Hommes Nouveaux* to the printer, Cendrars hung around the cafés and attended public

discussions and lectures, trying to insert himself into the Parisian scene. Among those he rubbed elbows with was the anarchist Kibaltchich, who some eighteen years later, under the pseudonym Victor Serge, would translate his novel *L'Or* into Russian.

On October 10, 1912, Cendrars attended an important art exhibition at the gallery La Boétie. Titled “Le Salon de la Selection d’Or,” the exhibition featured works by Jacques Villon, Juan Gris, André Lhote, Roger de la Fresnaye, Louis Marcoussis, Francis Picabia, Jean Metzinger, Tobeen, and two dozen others. The highlight was a showing of Marcel Duchamp’s *Nu descendant un escalier*. Duchamp’s painting had been displayed in Barcelona in the spring of 1912, and had been infamously listed but not shown at the Société des Artistes Indépendants, which had run from March through May. It had also been rejected by the Salon d’Automne, but hung proudly at Le Salon de la Selection d’Or. Yet it wasn’t Duchamp’s painting that made the strongest impression on Cendrars, but instead the work of Fernand Léger, who was to become a lifelong friend, confidante, and occasional collaborator. It was through Léger that Cendrars would meet Robert and Sonia Delaunay, both of whom would turn out to be among his closest comrades.

Les Hommes Nouveaux was in many ways dead on arrival, though some aspects of its short run and its peripheral influence on Cendrars’ early career are worth noting. Only one issue was ever actually published, that in October 1912. A second issue was announced, but never produced. The sole issue is exceedingly rare today—even the Bibliothèque National de France does not possess a copy. The cover lists the names of the publication’s directors: Blaise Cendrars, Emil Szitty, and Marius Hanot (an anarchist turned communist who abandoned all political and artistic activities after being released from prison in 1921, and about whom little is known). The journal’s contents are signed

by those three, plus two others (Jack Lee and Diogène), both of whom were in reality Cendrars himself. Thus, *Les Hommes Nouveaux* was essentially a vanity project, though its founders did not initially conceive of it being so.

Unable to come up with the funds or the contributors for issue number two, the trio directing *Les Hommes Nouveaux* changed tactics. They decided that rather than publishing a periodical, they would instead launch a series of books and attempt to sign up subscribers. They initially called the new enterprise “la Collection Triumvir.” Cendrars wrote the text for their statement of purpose:

Avec la volonté de supprimer les intermédiaires si souvent fâcheux entre l’artiste et le public, nous vous offrons une collection d’ouvrages des meilleurs écrivains de la jeune génération, sans distinction d’école, avec le souci seulement de déterminer le sens de la dernière évolution de la pensée dans l’art . . . Au point de vue typographique la *Collection Triumvir* présente un caractère de luxe et de modernité extrême qui n’exclura pas les souvenirs d’une tradition qui a valu à la France une renommée universelle. Une grande variété présidera au choix des papiers, des formats et des caractères d’impression.

(BC 353)

And what was the first volume published by this new concern? *Les Pâques à New-York*, the title given on the cover simply as *Les Pâques*, complete with a drawing by Cendrars, an illustration he later called “un méchant dessin” (BC 353). The three directors

distributed the book —more of a booklet, really—around Paris, hand-delivering it to anyone they thought might be interested. They distributed a little over a hundred copies. Cendrars made certain that one was delivered to Apollinaire, though he'd still had no reply to his sending of the typescript months before.

Then, within a couple of weeks of the first publication of *Les Pâques*, Cendrars received not one, but three messages from Apollinaire, inviting him to join the group of writers and artists that met at the Café Flore every Wednesday evening. Cendrars went, and not only met Apollinaire, but also the artists Robert and Sonia Delaunay. He charmed Sonia by conversing with her in her native Russian, and by the end of the evening the Delaunays had invited him to an upcoming soirée at their apartment on the rue des Grands-Augustins.

At the soirée, Sonia Delaunay asked Blaise to read his poem “Les Pâques.” Miriam Cendrars described the scene:

De sa voix un peu traînante, assez haut perchée, une voix de tête plutôt que de coffre, avec son accent jurassien qui n'a encore été rabeté ni par l'italien, ni par l'allemand, ni par le russe, ni par l'anglais ou l'américain, tranquillement, sans emphase, laissant les mots, les vers, le rythme, traduire l'angoisse, la douleur, la pitié, l'indignation, la supplication, Blaise Cendrars lit pour la première fois devant l'auditoire tant espéré l'hymne qui lui est montée directement de l'âme.

(BC 356)

And Apollinaire's reaction? According to Robert Goffin (who must have heard the story from someone else, since he was only 14 years old at the time, and is unlikely to have been there himself, but is nevertheless quoted on the subject by Miriam Cendrars),

Apollinaire avait pâli. Quelque chose de neuf le bouleversait. Il restait muet à l'écouter, les yeux fermés! Et tout le monde sentit que le vent du génie passait dans l'atelier. Apollinaire félicita son ami; il se déclara très ému . . . « C'est formidable, dit Guillaume, à côté de ça, que vaut le livre que je prépare? » . . . Puis ils parlèrent d'autre chose, mais on sentait que Guillaume était bouleversé, peut-être même était-il un peu ému par cette explosion de qualité . . .

(BC 356)

Thus began a friendship, sometimes contentious, that Cendrars and Apollinaire would have until the latter's untimely death in 1918. They now met every day, walking around Paris, mostly in the Marais, talking about their childhoods, their current lives, and of course about art and poetry. Apollinaire told Blaise that he believed "Les Pâques à New-York" was better than any poem that had been published in the *Mercure de France* in the previous ten years—high praise, especially considering that Apollinaire's poem "La Chanson du mal-aimé" had been published in the *Mercure* in 1909. They discussed many different potential projects, including the creation of a literary review they intended to call *Zones*.

When Cendrars had given his reading at the apartment of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, he'd left behind several copies of the printed book of *Les Pâques à New-York*. Sonia read and re-read it, and fell in love with its rhythms and its emotional content. It became a precious little book for her, and in Cendrars' absence, she began to make collages from shapes she cut from colorful paper as she read the poem aloud to herself. "Elle lit lentement le poème et à chaque strophe elle attend que les couleurs évoquent en elle le même langage," writes Miriam Cendrars (BC 361). When Blaise visited next, on New Year's Day, 1913, he was astonished to see that Sonia Delaunay had created a new binding for his book. Michel Hoog, curator of the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, described the piece in his book *Robert et Sonia Delaunay*:

On ne saurait donner trop d'importance à cette précieuse reliure exécutée le 1^{er} janvier 1913, en présence de Blaise Cendrars, et qui constitue, autant et plus que le numéro précédent, l'inauguration d'un langage nouveau. Libérées de toute intention figurative, les taches de couleurs sont constituées par des morceaux de papier découpés et collés avec grand soin, déterminant des à-plats de forme régulière, sans aucune modification. L'utilisation du papier a permis à l'artiste un progrès décisif vers ce qu'il faut bien appeler l'abstraction géométrique, que R. et S. Delaunay n'ont approché dans leurs peintures à l'huile que plus tard. Cette reliure, exposée à Berlin en 1913, citée et reproduite plusieurs fois au lendemain de la guerre, montrée à ses visiteurs par R. Delaunay, qui y attachait

beaucoup d'importance, n'a pu qu'influencer Klee, Freundlich, les peintres du *Stijl* et de l'abstraction géométrique.

(124)

The influence on literature, art, and design that Hoog describes was only beginning. In the fruitful years of 1913 and 1914, the seeds of Cendrars' influence would be well and truly planted, and continue to bear fruit to the present day.

For his part, Apollinaire was already influential. By 1913-14, his career was at its zenith. He was widely published and was sought after as a leading voice of the new aesthetics. His reviews and criticism were in such demand that he turned to Cendrars to ghostwrite pieces for him and to translate for foreign publication work he had written. As Jay Bochner notes in *Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Re-creation*, Cendrars wrote several art reviews for *L'Intransigeant* which appeared under Apollinaire's name and translated Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes* for Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm* (45).

An issue between Cendrars and Apollinaire that scholars have been unable to conclusively resolve, despite their being no dearth of opinions on the subject, is whether (and to what extent) Apollinaire plagiarized Cendrars, Cendrars plagiarized Apollinaire, or the two poets borrowed from one another. Mutually beneficial borrowing is most likely, since both writers tended to be recyclers and not overly proprietary about their work. The question become most clear in the case of Apollinaire's famous poem "Zone," especially when one compares it to Cendrars' "Les Pâques."

There are undeniable similarities between the two poems: both are organized around an epic walk in an urban setting (Paris for Apollinaire and New York for

Cendrars) that goes from one day/night to the next; both feature advertising, cars and trains, and office workers scurrying to and from their desk jobs, all of these being elements of the modern; both possess a powerful and prominent spiritual component, specifically a Christian one, in which Christ is continually crucified on the hilltop of modernity. Both switch the form of address from the first person to the second person without strain. One could go on, for reading the two poems side by side makes clear their profound resonances with one another. For purposes of literary history, then, the questions become: which came first, and does it even matter?

As noted above, Cendrars mailed Apollinaire a typescript of “Les Pâques” in the late summer of 1912. Jay Bochner writes that “Gabrielle Buffet remembers that in October [1912] Apollinaire read a poem like ‘Zone,’ which was then called ‘Cri,’ at her mother’s home in the Jura. Her husband, Francis Picabia, had brought Apollinaire and Marcel Duchamp to visit . . .” (44). “Les Pâques” was first published in book form in November, and though there is no hard evidence that Cendrars attempted to get a copy to Apollinaire, it stands to reason that he would have, considering that he’d mailed him the typescript mere months before. “Zone” was first published in the December issue of *Les Soirées de Paris*, but according to Bochner Apollinaire was already making proof corrections in November. What is clear is that the two poems were published almost simultaneously, mere weeks apart. Critic Michael Décaudin, in his *Le Dossier d’Alcools*, has analyzed every known draft of “Zone,” and concludes that Cendrars was indeed Apollinaire’s source: “Tout se passe comme si, dans ses corrections, Apollinaire avait voulu différencier son poème des *Pâques*” (35). In *Apollinaire et Cendrars*, Marc Poupon goes even further, writing that “L’inspiration le cède à une imitation plus flagrante . . .”

(13). But even if Apollinaire crossed some line between being inspired by Cendrars' poem and imitating it, is such imitation aesthetically objectionable?

The question becomes murkier still when we consider that Cendrars also borrowed from Apollinaire, especially in his poem "Le Transsibérien," first published in 1913. There Cendrars quotes two lines from Apollinaire's 1908 poem "Les Fiançailles" ("Pardonnez-moi mon ignorance / Pardonnez-moi de ne plus connaître l'ancien jeu des vers"), though he follows with the appropriate attribution in the very next line ("Comme dit Guillaume Apollinaire"). Then there is Apollinaire writing "Nous avions loué deux coupés dans le Transsibérien" in his 1913 poem "Arbre." Though "Arbre" was published a few months before Cendrars' "Transsibérien," Apollinaire likely read the Cendrars poem in manuscript in early 1913. Further yet, both poets employ the image of a certain clock in Prague, Cendrars in "Transsibérien" ("l'horloge du quartier juif de Prague qui tourne éperdument à rebours") and Apollinaire in both "Zone" ("Les aiguilles de l'horloge du quartier juif vont à rebours / Et tu recules aussi dans ta vie lentement") and in the story "Le Passant de Prague" from the 1910 collection *L'Hérésiarque et Cie*, the very title Cendrars was sent to jail for shoplifting.

I concur with Jay Bochner: what this all amounts to is friendly borrowing rather than malicious plagiarism, two poets sorting out the vocabulary of modernity in tandem. One may also view this borrowing as reflective of the emerging aesthetics of the two writers, as Bochner does:

These were, I cannot but believe, friendly gestures, not plagiarisms, which would have been recognized by almost anyone in the avant-garde.

Besides, Cendrars was on the threshold of the “found poem” and Apollinaire of what he called the “poème-conversation.”

(DR 46)

The avant-garde of the day (and of subsequent days also) was moving away from the “genius” ideal of 19th-century Romantics and Symbolists, and was coming to rely much more on collaborative efforts, collage, and pastiche. The mutual borrowings of Cendrars and Apollinaire seem solidly in this vein. The best evidence for Cendrars’ interest in such approaches is his poetry collection *Kodak (Documentaire)*, published in 1924 (published, ironically enough, by Stock, who had in 1910 published Apollinaire’s *L’Hérésiarque et Cie*, and from whose bookstore Cendrars had stolen the volume), the text of which, decades later, was proven to be an intricate cut-up of *Le Mystérieux Dr. Cornélius*, a pulp novel by Gustave Le Rouge.

Then there is the interesting case of Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Walt Whitman. The effect of Whitman’s work can be seen in Cendrars’ long, expansive, maximalist poems “Le Transsibérien” and “Panama,” and more generally, Whitman had been important for French poets since at least 1886, when Jules Lafourge had published translations of Whitman in *La Vogue*. According to Jay Bochner, “the influence of Whitman is unequivocal in Maeterlinck’s *Les serres chaudes* (1889), Verhaeren, Claudel, Gide’s first *Nourritures terrestres* (1897), Valery Larbaud’s *A.O. Barnabooth* (1913), and Jules Romain’s *La vie unanime* (1908)” (48). The first full translation into French of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1909. Literary history aside, however, the salient point

regarding Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Whitman involves an article ostensibly penned by Apollinaire and published in the *Mercure de France*.

On April 1, 1913 (April Fool's Day, it is worth keeping in mind), as one of his series "La Vie anecdotique," Apollinaire published an account of what transpired at Walt Whitman's funeral in 1892, claiming that he'd received the description from an eyewitness. In his 1955 book *Walt Whitman Abroad*, Gay Wilson Allen summarizes:

On April 1, 1913, Apollinaire published in the *Mercure de France* an astonishing account of Whitman's funeral. Apollinaire claimed that an eye-witness had told him that the funeral was held in a circus tent, that a barbecue lunch with barrels of beer was provided for the disorderly crowd that attended, and that three brass bands played continuously. Many perverted men came, everyone drank enormously, the festivities lasted until dawn, and some of the impromptu speakers punctuated their remarks by thumping on the coffin with their fists.

(58)

Apollinaire's precise description, as given in the *Mercure*, was that "Les pédérastes étaient venus en foule . . ." (DR 49). Apollinaire's assertion that Whitman's funeral comprised a veritable mob of homosexual men touched off a firestorm of controversy that raged in the pages of the *Mercure* for months. The situation became so bad that Apollinaire, in his column "La Vie anecdotique" published in the December 16, 1913 issue of the *Mercure*, issued a half-hearted retraction in which he claimed "J'ai rapporté

le détail des funérailles tel qu'il m'a été raconté en présence d'un jeune poète de talent, M. Blaise Cendrars." Though his statement may have served to deflect some of the blame for the Whitman debacle from himself (and onto Cendrars), thereby preserving some of the status he had acquired when he began to write for the mighty *Mercure*, it also seems to confirm that Apollinaire was in on the hoax. For one thing, his account of Whitman's funeral was published on April Fool's Day, after all, and for another, Apollinaire would have known full well that Cendrars could not have been an eyewitness to the funeral, having been only five years old (and nowhere near Camden, New Jersey) in 1892. The whole affair may have simply been a joke that got out of hand, but with it began a cooling of the friendship between Apollinaire and Cendrars that remained unresolved when the former died in November 1918.

Despite his connections to Apollinaire, Chagall, and many others, and despite the 1912 publication of *Les Pâques à New-York*, Cendrars remained a virtual unknown. That began to change with the September 1913 publication of the long poem *Prose du transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (later called simply *Le Transsibérien*). The book—if it could even properly be called a mere book—was breathtakingly original in both form and content. The original edition, published by Les Hommes Nouveaux, contains the poem, which is printed in more than ten different type faces and sizes and in different colors, alongside a brightly-colored abstract painting by Sonia Delaunay. The text runs down the right and the painting down the left side of a single sheet that is over six and a half feet long and over one foot wide. The sheet was folded accordion-style, like a map, and thus appeared like an ordinary paperback with a map of Russia on the cover. One hundred and fifty copies were intended to be produced, so that their combined height

would reach the top of the Eiffel Tower, but ultimately only sixty to seventy copies were printed. Of those sixty, approximately thirty survive today. In 2012, a copy sold at Christie's for €481,000.

Cendrars' text is a long, maximalist poem narrating his youthful adventures in Russia and China. It is a poem concerned with physical travel through a suffering world. The speaker's titular companion, Jehanne, repeats the question "Dis, Blaise, sommes-nous bien loin de Montmartre?" over and over again. The train ride aboard the Trans-Siberian is both apocalyptic and redemptive. The speaker is dislocated and disoriented, carried along by the modern conveyance of the epically long railroad. The poem begins:

En ce temps-là j'étais en mon adolescence

J'avais à peine seize ans et je ne me souvenais déjà plus de mon enfance

J'étais à 16.000 lieues du lieu de ma naissance

J'étais à Moscou, dans la ville des mille et trois clochers et des sept gares

(OC 1: 20)

In Moscow, the self-described "mauvais poète" sees "Le Kremlin . . . comme un immense gâteau tartare," "les pigeons du Saint-Esprit s'envolaient sur la place," and feels "la venue du Christ rouge de la révolution russe" (OC 1: 20-21). He travels through Siberia, where he describes "les eaux limoneuses de l'Amour charriaient des millions de charognes," and to Harbin, Manchuria, where "on venait de mettre le feu aux bureaux de la Croix-Rouge" (OC 1: 21, 32). Points along the route include Tomsk, Chelyabinsk, Irkutsk, Talga (where "100.000 blessés agonisaient faute de soins"), Khilok, where the

poet says “nous avons croisé un long convoi de soldats fous,” the Gobi Desert, and Port Arthur (OC 1: 31). The poet recalls other itineraries he may have taken or not (Basel-Timbuktu, Paris-New York, Madrid-Stockholm) and writes that “Il n’y a plus que la Patagonie, la Patagonie, qui convienne à mon immense tristesse, la Patagonie, et un voyage dans les mers du Sud” (OC 1: 24-5). Along the way, and along the course of the poem, there is Jehanne:

Car elle est mon amour, et les autres femmes
 N’ont que des robes d’or sur de grands corps de flammes,
 Ma pauvre amie est si esseulée,
 Elle est toute nue, n’a pas de corps — elle est trop pauvre.

Elle n’est qu’une fleur candide, fluette,
 La fleur du poète, un pauvre lys d’argent
 Tout froid, tout seul, et déjà si fané
 Que les larmes me viennent si je pense à son cœur.

(OC 1: 24)

In the end, after dizzying travels through both landscapes and timescapes, the poet who says again and again “Je ne sais pas aller jusqu’au bout” comes to an end, or at least to the end of the poem, at Paris, “Ville de la Tour unique du grand Gibet et de la Roue,” where he intends to go to the Lapin Agile “me ressouvenir de ma jeunesse perdue” (OC 1: 33).

Le Transsibérien is considered to be the first “simultaneous book.” Delaunay’s painting is not merely an illustration of the poem, nor does Cendrars’ poem simply reflect the painting. Instead, the two function together, both by way of collaboration and contrast. In a news release Cendrars published in *Paris-Journal* on October 17, 1913, he wrote:

Le simultanisme de ce livre est dans sa représentation simultanée et non illustrative. Les contrastes simultanés des couleurs et le texte forment des profondeurs et des mouvements qui sont l’inspiration nouvelle.

Apollinaire and others credited Cendrars and Delaunay with creating “simultanisme,” but Henri-Martin Barzun and some Italian Futurists disagreed. In his review *Poème et Drame*, Barzun had developed a theory of simultaneity that was, according to Miriam Cendrars, “une technique du rythme polyhymnique, une sorte de libretto d’un choral parlé à plusieurs voix. C’est une conception purement vocale et scénique” (BC 390). Barzun wrote that the poet of simultaneity hears

chanter toutes les voix, toutes les passions, toutes les présences, toutes les forces de cette vie et de cet univers, et qu’au lieu de les transcrire successivement par le récepteur de son esprit successif il les transpose simultanément tels qu’il les perçoit par tous ses sens . . .

(BC 390)

Though Barzun's description might fit Whitman or Jack Kerouac or Allen Ginsberg, it does not adequately describe the sort of simultaneity achieved by Cendrars and Delaunay with *Le Transsibérien*. And beyond an aesthetic disagreement, there was more: Barzun and his allies accused Cendrars of essentially stealing their idea of simultaneity. As Cendrars described decades later in the series of interviews with Michael Manoll published as *Blaise Cendrars vous parle . . .*,

quand je publiai *Le Transsibérien*, le premier livre simultané . . . me traitèrent d'épigone et m'accusèrent de plagiat. Il n'était pas bon d'être un jeune authentique parmi toutes ces vieilles gloires de la queue du symbolisme, qui se prenaient tous pour des bardes sacrés. Des bardes, oui, et je leur éclatais de rire au nez. Je me suis fait mes premiers ennemis littéraires . . .

(OC 8: 653)

Cendrars further laid out his position in a pair of letters to André Salmon, editor of *Gil Blas*, the first of which was published in that magazine, and the second of which was not. First, on October 12, 1913, he wrote that "Le simultanéisme annoncé n'est pas 'la profondeur psychologique' de Barzun, il est purement pictural comme dans les tableaux de M. Robert Delaunay. Il est représentatif" (IS 363). Then, later the same day, using in part the same phrases he would include five days later in his press release for *Le Transsibérien*, he wrote that:

La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France est, rassurez vos confrères, munie de points et de virgules. On ne les enlèvera point. J'estime beaucoup la réforme de l'inimitable Apollinaire. Mais je crois qu'il a fait fausse route en l'appliquant à des formes et à des poèmes anciens. Ma ponctuation n'est pas de syntaxe, mais rythmique. L'inspiration de ce poème m'est venue naturellement, et, comme vous le pensez, loin des trépidations commerciales de M. Marinetti.

Vos pressentiments me forcent à ajouter quelques éclaircissements sur le métier nouveau. Le Simultanisme de ce livre est dans sa présentation simultanée et non illustrative. Les contrastes simultanés des couleurs et le texte forment des profondeurs et des mouvements qui sont l'inspiration nouvelle.

Maintenant, pour qu'il n'y ait pas de malentendu et quoique vous n'en ayez pas parlé, permettez-moi de vous dire que ce premier Livre Simultané est également loin des théories scolaires du pion Henri Martin Barzun, qui, dogmatique, publie sous couverture d'indigestes conversations successives.

(IS 363-4)

Cendrars' letters to Salmon and to Barzun were answered in kind, and in print, and the accusations over the proper definition and provenance of Simultaneism went back and

forth until, in a letter to Robert and Sonia Delaunay written in January 1914, Cendrars abandoned the fight:

Pour le livre du Simultané. J'y ai beaucoup réfléchi. Je m'arrête. Ce n'est pas à moi d'écrire des « théories » ou un livre de « polémiques ». Si ce livre ne doit être ni de l'un ni de l'autre « genre », alors j'ai mes poèmes! Et mes poèmes, je ne les nomme pas simultanés. Simultané, vous l'employez dans votre métier. Votre métier ne m'intéresse pas. Je n'y entends rien. Pas plus qu'à la cordonnerie ou qu'au saquage. Il n'y a que les réalisations de votre métier de peintre qui m'intéressent. Quant à la littérature, je n'en fais pas. Ainsi, je n'ai pas de métier, la poésie n'ayant pas de matière. C'est là que nous divergeons. Nous sommes d'accord pour travailler avec l'esprit le plus sensuel.

(IS 373)

Thus, Cendrars withdrew from the controversy, establishing a pattern that would repeat throughout his career: whenever others attempted to embroil him in artistic controversy, he simply walked away. The effect on Cendrars of the public argument over Simultaneism, however, was significant. For the first time, he was established in the public eye as a writer of note, as one whose work was to be taken seriously. As Miriam Cendrars puts it, “un nom est maintenant connu de tous ceux qui s'intéressent au mouvement d'avant-garde—Blaise Cendrars, le poète, l'auteur de l'œuvre la plus audacieuse de cette époque d'audaces” (BC 395).

Féla left America and rejoined Blaise in Paris in May 1913. Though money was as scarce as ever, they lived more or less happily. Blaise wrote the poems that would be later published as *Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles* and *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* (in 1918 and 1919, respectively). In the late summer of 1913, Féla learned that she was pregnant with Blaise's child. Their son Odilon was born on April 7, 1914. The First World War broke out in August, and Féla and Blaise were married on September 16, 1914, just before he left for the front. The English writer and painter Frank Budgen, in his 1970 book *Myself When Young*, wrote a vivid description of Cendrars as he appeared just before the war:

A bird man—chough or raven? Cendrars seemed to have been everywhere: Russia. America. New York. St. Petersburg. Forests of the Amazon. He knew them all. And any suspicions of longbrow practice had soon to be set aside in face of the simplicity of his narrative. Bird is not quite right. Birds' flights, song, and nestings are as predictable as tax demands. The comings and goings of Cendrars had no such fixed pattern.

As he was, so his writing, so his preferences. He held that the lurid stories of Fantomas then running in a Parisian daily newspaper were the modern equivalent of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Though Budgen's description could perhaps just as easily apply to the Cendrars who emerged from the war as it could to the prewar Cendrars, there is no doubt that Blaise was about to undergo an utterly transformative experience on the battlefields of the Western Front.

CHAPTER TWO
LE LÉGION, LE MANCHOT

On the 28th of June 1914, in Sarajevo, Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip. For the next few weeks, sides aligned and tensions ran high. War was imminent. On July 29, a “claironnant appel” written and signed by Blaise Cendrars, Italian writer and film theorist Ricciotto Canudo, and others, and directed to foreigners residing in France, was published in many of the Parisian newspapers. The appeal read:

L’heure est grave.

Tout homme digne de ce nom doit aujourd’hui agir, doit se défendre de rester inactif au milieu de la plus formidable déflagration que l’histoire ait jamais pu enregistrer.

Toute hésitation serait un crime. Point de paroles, donc des actes.

Des étrangers amis de la France, qui pendant leur séjour en France ont appris à l’aimer et à la chérir comme une seconde patrie, sentent le besoin impérieux de lui offrir leurs bras.

Intellectuels, étudiants, ouvriers, hommes valides, de toute sorte—nés ailleurs, domiciliés ici—nous qui avons trouvé en France la nourriture matérielle, groupons-nous-en un faisceau solide de volontés mises au service de la plus grande France.

Signé: Blaise Cendrars, Leonard Sarlius, Csaki, Kaplan, Berr, Oknosky, Isbicki, Schoumoff, Roldireff, Kozline, Essen, Lipschitz, Frisendahl, Israilivitch, Vertepoff, Canudo.

(BC 407)

On August 2, Germany declared war on France, and on August 3, Cendrars and Canudo enlisted in the Légion étrangère. Blaise went to infantry training, and Féla and their infant son Odilon relocated from Paris to Forges, neat La Rochelle. There, because of her Polish nationality, which the locals perhaps misperceived as German, she was met with suspicion and threats of violence. In her journal, she wrote “Et la rage des villageois se déchaina sur moi et sur mon enfant: « Mort aux espions! » Dans leur exaltation patriotique, ils jetaient des pierres à mes fenêtres” (BC 408).

For Blaise, as for countless others, the war was an initiation, a horrific trauma, and a re-education. Much later, he described his war experience as being a valuable “release from the caviling, ingrown life of the artistic community”: “La guerre m’a sauvé la vie. Ça a l’air d’un paradoxe, mais cent fois je me suis dit depuis que si j’avais continué à vivre avec tous ces gens-là, j’en aurais claqué” (DR 56). Life in the trenches was obviously not conducive to the sorts of aesthetic disputes in which he had

increasingly become entangled since 1912. Nor was it conducive to the actual practice of writing, at least not for him, as he told Michael Manoll decades later in *Blaise Cendrars vous parle . . .*: “Quand on écrit, on ne combat pas à coups de fusil et quand on tire des coups de fusil, on n’écrit pas, on écrit après. On aurait bien mieux fait d’écrire avant et d’empêcher tout ça . . .” (OC 8: 646).

The list of actions in which Cendrars and his fellow Legionnaires fought reads like a blow by blow account of the first months of the war on the Western Front: May 1915 at Artois, where over 100,000 French casualties were suffered in less than a month of fighting, and where Cendrars saw action on the notorious Vimy Ridge; Souchez and Givenchy, notorious disasters that were part of the larger Artois campaign; and Saint-Marie-aux-Mines, after which the division was relieved. In July 1915 Cendrars went on leave to Paris (his 1946 novel *La main coupée* ends with his arrival “à Paname,” indicating “Paname” as a commonly-used slang for Paris). There, for the first time, he saw a Charlie Chaplin film. The event was so significant for him that later, in his book *Trop c’est trop* (1957), he devoted a chapter to the experience: “Charlot,” employing the nickname used in France for Chaplin.

Then, after his short leave was over, he was sent back to the front. By September 1915, his unit was in Champagne, where the battle commenced in earnest on the 25th. The course of the battle was the same as most others on the Western Front: a day or two or three of tremendous artillery barrages against the enemy trenches, followed by infantry surges forward. Cendrars and his fellow Legionnaires, including the American writer Alan Seeger, were in the thick of things. Then, on September 28th, at La Ferme Navarin, where today stands the imposing monument “Aux Morts des Armées de Champagne,”

Cendrars was grievously wounded by artillery shrapnel. The lower part of his right arm was blown off. Over thirty years later, in *La main coupée*, he described the scene:

Planté dans l’herbe comme une grande fleur épanouie, un lys rouge, un bras humain tout ruisselant du sang, un bras droit sectionné au-dessus du coude et dont la main encore vivante fouissait le sol des doigts comme pour y prendre racine . . . A qui était cette main, ce bras droit, ce sang qui coulait comme la sève?

(OC 5: 542)

On the night of September 28, independently of one another, both Féla and Sonia Delaunay had dreams about Blaise. Miriam Cendrars writes that Féla, “A l’aube d’une nuit fébrile, dans un demi-sommeil,” saw Blaise standing before her, “pâle mais souriant, avec un bras en écharpe.” He spoke to her, saying “Maintenant, je ne pourrai plus écrire. Tu vois? Je me ferai marchand des quatre saisons. Je gagnerai plus d’argent” (BC 422). Delaunay, in Portugal, reported that:

Une nuit, j’ai rêvé de Blaise et qu’il avait un bras coupé. Impressionnée, j’avais raconté mon rêve à Robert, et nous avons aussitôt écrit à Blaise. Cette prémonition ou télépathie s’est produite à peu près au moment où Blaise, effectivement, perdait son bras à la guerre.

(BC 422)

Evacuated from the front lines to a military hospital at Châlons-sur-Marne, Blaise had the rest of his right arm amputated. He was right-handed, and thus had always written with his right hand. From this point forward, he would have to learn a different way.

In the hospital, Blaise worked to gain utility of his left hand by shadow-boxing and tossing oranges and balls in the air. Féla visited him and informed him that she was pregnant again (their son Remy would be born in April 1916). On November 27, Blaise was awarded a citation for his service. It read: “Bien que grièvement blessé au début de l’attaque du 28.9.15 et épuisé par la perte du sang [il] a continué à entraîner son escouade à l’assaut et est resté avec elle jusqu’au la fin de l’action” (BC 424). The following month, he received his decoration, a Croix de guerre with palm. Due to his service, by February 1916 he had acquired full French citizenship.

He returned to Paris as soon as he was able, but almost all of his prewar companions were gone—either at the front themselves or having fled the country for safer places (like the Delaunays in Portugal).

He attempted to write, and to do other sorts of remunerative work, but found himself stymied. He planned future projects, as is evident from a letter he wrote to August Suter on April 28, 1916: “Tout va bien. Je travaille. Pourriez-vous m’envoyer ce qui a été publié, en Suisse, sur le général Suter, votre grand-oncle. Possédez-vous des papiers le concernant et y a-t-il quelque chose d’inédit à la Bibliothèque de Bâle? Si oui, je viendrai y passer quelques jours” (BC 427). Cendrars still had the General Suter project in mind, and was digging deep to locate archival materials that he could use in writing the book.

In May, Blaise learned that his poem “Crépitements,” written in 1913, had been published in the first issue of the Zurich-based journal *Cabaret Voltaire*. How had the Cendrars poem ended up there, published without his knowledge or permission? The last line of the poem reveals the answer: “Et j’envoie ce poème dépouillé à mon ami R . . .” (OC 1: 67). “R” is Ludwig Rubiner, one of Blaise’s old friends from his days in Bern, and one of the principals, along with Hugo Ball, Richard Hülsenbeck, Hans Arp, and Tristan Tzara, of the burgeoning Dada scene in Zurich. As was the case with his involvement with other artistic movements, Cendrars’ association with Dada was fleeting and almost accidental. The Cuban painter Francis Picabia painted his portrait *Cendrars au retour de la guerre*, and would later design book covers for him. He knew many of the Dadaists, especially once they’d made themselves known in Paris, but his associations with them followed a familiar pattern. As Miriam Cendrars writes:

Mais dès que Dada deviendra dadaïsme affublé de dadaïstes, Blaise s’en méfiera, puis s’éloignera, plus dada que dada, par son gout de la liberté, son rejet de tout école, et peut-être est-ce lui qui, par son entière existence, maintiendra vivant et sans définition la véritable esprit dada.

(BC 434)

Underscoring the looseness of his affiliation with Dada, the first thing Cendrars published after returning from the war was a nearly conventional poem, “La Guerre au Luxembourg,” which was published in an edition of 1,000 copies by Niestlé in 1916, with six illustrations by the painter Moïse Kisling. Dedicated to his comrades in the

Foreign Legion, the poem depicts children playing war in the Luxembourg Gardens while at the same time actual war rages on the front to the north. The effect is poignant, especially at the poem's end, when the poet predicts that when the soldiers return from the real front at the end of the war, they will be treated like children themselves. As Jay Bochner puts it, "these poems would have been the most accessible of Cendrars' work for the readers and critics of the time" (DR 125). Despite its relatively straightforward approach, especially as compared to Cendrars' other, more avant-garde works that came just before and just after, "La Guerre au Luxembourg" is a worthy poem. Max Jacob certainly thought so. In a 1917 letter to Jacques Doucet, he wrote that "Les deux dernières pages de *La Guerre au Luxembourg* sont parmi les plus belles choses que j'ai jamais lues" (DR 126).

In late 1916, Cendrars and others began a series of presentations at the studio of the Swiss painter Lejeune, located at 6 rue Huyghens. In his 1968 book *An Impersonation of Angels*, Cocteau biographer Frederick Brown wrote that this was "a pivotal event in the history of the avant-garde, for it brought on stage figures whose stars would rise meteorically between the two wars and collected an audience heralding Montparnasse of the 1920s" (158). Notable figures reading and presenting at the Salle Huyghens included Cendrars, Apollinaire (who had returned from the war with a serious head wound), Cocteau, Max Jacob, and Pierre Reverdy. Composers also gave concerts at the venue, including such later luminaries as Erik Satie, Arthur Honegger, and Georges Auric.

In early 1917, Cendrars left Paris for Cannes, where Féla and their two sons had been living for some time. There, he wrote the short, entirely surrealist prose-poem "Profond aujourd'hui," which was published later the same year by A La Belle Édition,

with five illustrations by Angel Zarraga. The piece opens with “Je ne sais plus si je regarde un ciel étoilé nu ou une goutte d’eau au microscope” and closes thus:

Avec tout ce qui est racine et cime, et qui palpate, jouit et s’extasie.
Phénomènes de cette hallucination congénitale qu’est la vie dans toutes
ses manifestations et l’activité continue de la conscience. Le moteur
tourne en spirale. Le rythme parle. Chimisme. Tu es.

(OC 4: 145)

In between, the piece is a mad rush of images, all of which seem to point to the recognition of a world simultaneously real and illusory. The world of machines does not serve to clarify matters, but only provokes more confusion (and even madness).

Microscopes and typewriters get us no closer to the truth, yet create their own, persuasive forms of truth. The senses are disarranged and rearranged. The poet is left with only the moment, the essential moment, the deep today of the title. Life is seen as both mystical and concrete, both transcendent and specific. For a piece that was written some seven years before the “official” beginning of Surrealism, “Profond aujourd’hui” is as close to being a statement of surrealist principles as it may be possible to produce.

While at Cannes, and at nearby Nice, Cendrars wrote up a list of writing projects that were already underway or that he expected to undertake in the near future. The list is dated February 14, 1917, and indicates the busy pace of work he was keeping up at the time: *Le Panama* (1918); *Aux antipodes de l’unité (L’Eubage)* (1917); *L’ABC du cinéma* (1919); *J’ai tué* (1918), *Les Atlantes* (1918, a film script for Abel Gance, never

produced); *La Fin du monde* (1919); *D'Outremer à Indigo* (a book of Cendrars' stories was published in 1940 with this title); and *Poèmes élastiques* (1919). Cendrars' ambitious program of production was noted by none other than Picasso, who is quoted as saying that "Blaise Cendrars revient de la guerre avec un bras en plus" (DR 61).

Around the autumn of 1917, Cendrars made a break with the literary world, though obviously not with literary work and production itself. The last entry in the *Inédits*, the posthumously published collection of Cendrars' letters and journal entries, is from January 15, 1917, in the form of a letter written from Cannes. From this point forward, it becomes more and more difficult to track Cendrars' movements and to gauge the rhythms of his quotidian life. Though he continued to publish, at times even prolifically, his presence on the Paris literary scene and among this or that school or group or movement diminishes precipitously. According to Jay Bochner, from 1917 forward:

We do not find Cendrars involved in the politics of art, the debates, the haggling among jealous movements; notabl[y] we will not find him in the famous battles of Dada, though *Dix-neuf Poèmes élastiques* was published by René Hilsum at Au Sans Pareil editions, one of the first and foremost organs for Dada, and *Littérature* would publish his work in the first and later issues [. . .] We have left only sporadic appearances here or there, reported as if a legend had suddenly risen from the past only to disappear

as quickly. Cendrars' leave-taking was not a sudden or categorical one, but rather the symbolic gesture of a renewed and confident independence.

(DR 61-2)

And there is one thing more: in late 1917, Blaise met a young actress named Raymone Duchâteau. She would be his close companion, and later his wife, from then until his death in 1961. As Cendrars put it, "1917. Ayant rencontré Raymone, j'ai pris congé de la poésie" (DR 62). He wrote virtually no poetry after this date. Though such neat distinctions and even ruptures are often less than accurate, serving the needs of literary historians better than they reflect reality, in the case of Cendrars the break from poetry is a fact. His poetry published after 1917 was all written before that time. Some have tried to link his abandonment of poetry to the loss of his right arm in the war, but Cendrars himself attributes his shift from poetry to prose to the beginning of his relationship with Raymone. Though they spent long periods of time apart due to both Raymone's stage career and Blaise's globetrotting, there is no doubt that the two were bound together from their initial meeting. Raymone's mother was less than impressed, ostensibly remarking "that there was only one poet-bum in Paris, and Raymone had got him" (DR 62).

But perhaps it is too easy, despite Cendrars' own claim, to attribute his break from poetry entirely to his meeting Raymone. In his 1945 book *L'Homme foudroyé*, he gave an alternate explanation:

Le comput de ma vie d'homme commence en octobre 1917 le jour où,
pour des nombreuses raisons dont je vous fais grâce mais dont la

principale était que la poésie qui prenait vogue à Paris me semblait devenir la base d'un malentendu spirituel et d'une confusion mentale . . . et que je quittai mes amis les poètes sans qu'aucun d'eux ne se doutât que je m'éloignais pour m'épanouir et me fortifier dans l'Amour, sur un plan où tout: actes, pensées, sentiments, paroles, est une communion universelle, après quoi, chose que j'ignorais moi-même alors, comme on entre en religion et franchit le cloître dont la grille se referme silencieusement sur vous, sans avoir prononcé de vœux, on est dans la solitude intégrale. En cage. Mais avec Dieu. C'est une grande force. Et l'on se tait par désir du verbe . . .

(OC 5: 178)

Yet Cendrars would hardly remain quiet for wanting the word, as he has it here. He continued to write and publish prolifically, though the social and literary aspects of his life would in fact be profoundly other than what they had been up to that time.

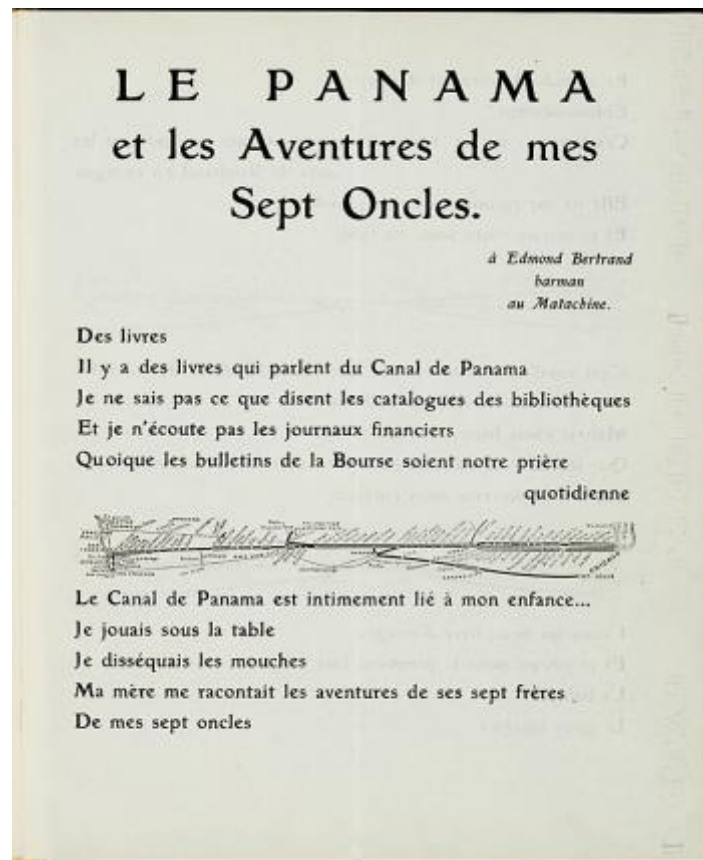
There was one more long, maximalist poem yet to be published, however: *Le Panama ou les aventures de mes sept oncles*, published by La Sirène in 1918. Together with *Les Pâques à New-York* and *Le transsibérien*, *Le Panama* is the third in the trio of important poems Cendrars wrote before the First World War, though it was not published until the war's end. Because of its connections to America, for purposes of this study it is as important as *Les Pâques* and perhaps more important than *Le transsibérien*.

The form and design of the original edition bears discussion. Anthology and other later reprints and translations of the poem seldom reproduce the original layout, which is striking and inventive.

First, there is the cover: softbound and folded down the middle so that the back cover is in essence both the front and back; small format, 23 centimeters long and 19.5 centimeters wide, as if meant to be carried in one's pocket; and bearing an image of a life-preserver on the front, suggesting a steamship schedule, an item with which Cendrars would have been well familiar. Published in an edition of 580 copies, the original is, as is the case with other early Cendrars works, exceedingly rare today. In 2009, a copy inscribed by Cendrars to Raymone Duchâteau (“À Raymone, ce poème que l'on croit être le dernier en son genre et qui est le premier d'un art nouveau”) sold at auction at Christie's for €10,625.



Then there is the text of the poem itself, which can hardly be done justice without reference to the placement of the images within it. Those images are “tracés de Chemins de fer américains” which link stanzas of variable lengths. For the most part, the rail lines illustrated are those that run between San Francisco and Chicago, segments of that route that are not repeated, with varying stops along the way. An example:



Midway through the poem Cendrars includes a full-page, authentic prospectus advertising “Denver, the Residence City and Commercial Center,” a product of the civic boosters at the Denver Chamber of Commerce. On the facing page is another segment of the rail line:

Denver, the Residence City and Commercial Center

DENVER is the capital of Colorado and the commercial metropolis of the Rocky Mountain Region. The city is in its fifty-fifth year and has a population of approximately 225,000 as indicated by the U. S. Census of 1910. Many people who have not visited Colorado, believe Denver is situated in the mountains. This city is located 12 miles east of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, near the north central part of the state, at the junction of the Platte River and Cherry Creek. The land is rolling, giving the city perfect drainage. Altitude one mile above sea level. Area 60 square miles.

Ideal Climate, Superior Educational Advantages, Unequaled Park System

DENVER has the lowest death rate of the cities of the United States.	DENVER has 29 parks; total area 1,238 acres.
DENVER has 61 grade schools, 4 high schools, 1 manual training school, 1 trade and 1 technical school.	DENVER has 11 playgrounds — 8 in parks, 3 in individual tracts.
DENVER has 209 churches of every denomination.	DENVER has 56 miles of drives in its parks.

Commercial and Manufacturing City


Annual Bank Clearings, \$487,848,305.95.	Annual manufacturing output, \$57,711,000 (1912).
Per capita clearings, \$180.00.	Eighteen trunk lines entering Denver, tapping the richest agricultural sections of the United States.

DENVER has 810 factories, in which 16,251 wage-earners were employed during 1911. The output of factories in DENVER in 1911 was valued at \$52,000,000. The payroll for the year was \$12,066,000 — OVER A MILLION DOLLARS A MONTH!

DENVER, COLORADO, BERLIN, GERMANY and MANCHESTER, ENGLAND, are cited by Economists as examples of inland cities which have become great because they are located at a sort of natural cross-roads.

For detailed information, apply to the *Denver Chamber of Commerce.*
Prospectus free.

Puis on continue



Les catapultes du soleil assiègent les tropiques irascibles
Riche Péruvien propriétaire d'une exploitation de guano
d'Angamos
On lance l'Acaraguan Bananan
A l'ombre
Les mulâtres hospitaliers
J'ai passé plus d'un hiver dans ces îles fortunées
L'oiseau-secrétaire est un éblouissement
Belles dames plantureuses
On boit des boissons glacées sur la terrasse
Un torpilleur brûle comme un cigare
Une partie de polo dans le champ d'ananas
Et les palétuviers éventent les jeunes filles studieuses

In earlier works, Cendrars had taken notice of both advertising and maps, but had simply described them. In *Le Panama*, he reproduces them, giving them a position of prominence in his text, rendering them as vital as (or perhaps even more vital than) the poetry itself. In the poem's fourth and fifth lines, he writes "Et je n'écoute pas les journaux financiers / Quoique les bulletins de la Bourse soient notre prière quotidienne," and the same might be said of civic brochures and train schedules (CP 246).

The poem itself is a distillation of Cendrars' life up to the time of its composition (including, prominently, his "Freddy Sauser" years) and a forecasting of his life to come. It is both history and prophecy, arrival and departure. As in *Les Pâques* and *Le transsibérien*, travel/movement is crucial, but in *Le Panama* the routes expand exponentially. *Les Pâques* describes the experience of traversing the metropolis on foot, its range perhaps a few miles of the 13-mile long island of Manhattan. *Le transsibérien*

spans a vast continent, the poem taking its readers from St. Petersburg and Moscow through Siberia to Manchuria and Peking and back again. *Le Panama* engages multiple continents, virtually spanning the entire globe in one way or another—and yet, the poet never seems to leave Paris. Paris is the magical gateway to the rest of the world, a portal from which he will depart and to which he will always return: “On passe sous la Tour Eiffel—boucler la boucle—pour retomber de l’autre côté du monde” (CP 255). There is even a hint concerning the primacy of Paris in the poem’s title itself: Panama could, of course, refer to the Central American nation and to the infamous French debacle there in 1892, when close to a billion francs were lost in an attempt to build a canal, but “le Paname” is also slang for the city of Paris itself, an argot that would have been commonly recognized in 1918. As Patrice Delbourg writes in *L’odyssée Cendrars*:

Ce surnom de la Ville lumière a été donné au début du XX^e siècle aux Parisiens qui avaient adopté le chapeau dit « panama » très pratique, mis en vogue par les ouvriers qui creusaient le canal du même nom. De Panamœ à Paname, de Pernambouc à Paname, d’Hollywood à Paname, jamais le poète Cendrars n’aura cessé de revenir vers les sortilèges de la capitale. Ce n’était pas sa cité-patrie ni son pavé nourricier, mais bien plutôt son refuge culturel. Un havre de paix. Le lieu où il faisait un bilan comptable après ses folles équipées. Un espace sécurisant où il reprenait des forces, donnait ses textes aux éditeurs et préparait ses future périple.

(131)

The poem plays with the various connotations of “Panama,” and is also playful in a general sense. It is dedicated “A Edmond Bertrand, barman au Matachine.” From the context of the poem, it seems clear that the Matachine is a bar in the canal zone, but “matachine” has other meanings as well: it is a traditional folk dance that was performed in Renaissance France by fraternities of clerics which most often satirized the rich, powerful, and holy, and in the Spanish-speaking world it is a dance performed widely, from Peru to New Mexico, in which masked dancers carry swords and dress in fantastic costumes. Chief characters of the South and North American matachine dances include Moctezuma, La Malinche (the Indian mistress of Cortes), El Toro (a malevolent, comic figure), Abuelo, and Abuela. The dance often treats the desertion of his people by Moctezuma. I don’t wish to assert that Cendrars definitively had these meanings in mind, though given his interest in anthropology and various strands of historical arcana, it would not be surprising if he did.

The figure of Edmond Bertrand, barman, occurs again later in the poem, and seems to be identical with not only the seventh uncle (of the titular “sept oncles”), but also with the poet himself, therefore as a sort of conductor, master of ceremonies, or lord of the dance that is the poem itself:

Mon septième oncle

On n’a jamais su ce qu’il devenu

On dit que je te ressemble

Je vous dédie de poème

Monsieur Bertrand

Vous m'avez offert des liqueurs fortes pour me prémunir contre les fièvres
du canal

Vous vous êtes abonné à l'Argus de la Presse pour recevoir toutes les
coupures

qui me concernent.

Dernier Français de Panama (il n'y en a pas 20)

Je vous dédie ce poème

Barman du Matachine

(CP 257)

Though the passage is, in its most direct sense, about the seventh uncle, the poet is told that he looks like that uncle, and the seventh uncle is associated with Monsieur Bertrand himself. The elision of pronouns mingles matters further: who is the “me” given strong drink by Bertrand? Who is the “me” whom the Press Argus clippings concern? Such questions have no firm answers in the world of *Le Panama*, but the ambiguities further the sense of the poem's play.

The poem's velocity is dizzying, carrying the reader along in a nearly hallucinatory fashion, but some discreet elements and tracks can be charted. If there is chaos and hallucination, it isn't due to a lack of control on Cendrars' part, as Jay Bochner observes:

Cendrars' care cannot be emphasized too often, for many critics take exception primarily to the "disorder" in his writing, whereas the truth is simply that his imaginative and associative reach is longer than what we are accustomed to. In these [first] few lines [of *Le Panama*] the interweaving has already begun, firstly of Panama with books and childhood.

(DR 114)

The opening line is a short one: "Des livres." The poet seems to discount them, at least from the perspective of his childhood experience. He continues: "Il y a des livres qui parlent du Canal de Panama / Je ne sais pas ce que disent les catalogues des bibliothèques." Then comes the well-known pair of lines, one of which has already been quoted above: "Et je n'écoute pas les journaux financiers / Quoique les bulletins de la Bourse soient notre prière quotidienne" (CP 246). Though there are many books about the Panama Canal, they are only capable of talking about it, whereas the poet seeks something closer to real experience. Though the Stock Market quotations are our daily prayers, one need not read about them to be impacted by them, as so many ordinary French citizens who invested in Panama bonds discovered so cruelly when the project crashed.

At the poem's start, the poet is a child, and "Le Canal de Panama est intimement lié à mon enfance." He plays under a table, dissecting flies, while his mother entertains him with tales about the adventures of her seven brothers. When she receives letters from those brothers— "Ces lettres avec les beaux timbres exotiques qui portent les vers de

Rimbaud en exergue”— their exploits become quite real, though on those days his mother reads the letters to herself and deprives him of stories: “Elle ne me racontait rien ce jour-là / Et je restais triste sous ma table” (CP 246). It is perhaps because she denies him the stories of his uncles and keeps their actual letters to herself that the poet begins fabricating his own versions.

The poet recounts his very early memories of picture books, before he could read, and says that his father lost three-fourths of his wealth in the Panama fiasco (though four lines later he clarifies that his father, “moins bête,” lost other people’s money. Regardless, the family’s fortunes are reversed, and they have to move from their villa to a too-small apartment crammed with furniture. “J’étais seul des jours entiers,” he writes, “Parmi les meubles entassés.” Then, after many long days, “Vint une lettre d’un mes oncles // C’est le crach du Panama qui fit de moi un poète!” There is no indication that this letter was intercepted by his mother, as the others had been, so perhaps it is his solitude, a solitude precipitated by the reversals of the economic crash, that in a very real sense allows him to gain access to this letter, itself a window onto a wider world, and thus make a poet out of him. Additionally, he identifies himself with an entire generation of young people whose chaotic lives trigger them to action and risk and quest:

Tous ceux de ma génération sont ainsi
 Jeunes gens
 Qui ont subi des ricochets étranges
 On ne joue plus avec des meubles
 On ne joue plus avec des vieilleries

On casse toujours et partout la vaisselle

On s'embarque

On chasse des baleines

On tue les morses

On a toujours peur de la mouche tsé-tsé

Car nous n'aimons pas dormir

(CP 248)

Because of unexpected upheavals and “weird ricochets,” the poet and others of his generation reject the domesticity of armchairs and parlors and investments that fail. They reject sleep. They awaken and remain awake.

The letter that arrives, the one from his uncle which turns the speaker into a poet, is explicitly unshared with his mother or anyone else, and its impact is described in the strongest of terms: “Oh cette première lettre que je déchiffrerai seul et plus grouillante que toute la création” (CP 248). The letter is from Uncle Number One. He is working as a butcher in Galveston, Texas. His description of his quotidian tasks, or the poet’s rendition of that description, is surreal: “C’est moi qui ramène les bêtes saignantes, le soir, tout le long de la mer / Et quand je passe les pieuvres se dressent en l’air / Soleil couchant . . .” And next come the lines that will recur as a refrain throughout the poem, and which contain an echo of the homesickness of *Le transsibérien*: “Et il y avait encore quelque chose / La tristesse / Et le mal du pays” (CP 248).

Then the poet is no longer in the letter itself, but is projecting forward from it, and/or reflecting backwards from knowledge gained later (in *Le Panama* such temporal

distinctions are not terribly meaningful), and narrating what became of Uncle Number One, the butcher of Galveston:

Mon oncle, tu as disparu durant le cyclone de 1895
 J'ai vu depuis la ville reconstruite et je me suis promené au bord de la mer
 où tu menais les bêtes saignantes
 Il y avait une fanfare salutiste qui jouait dans un kiosque en treillage
 On m'a offert une tasse du thé
 On n'a jamais retrouvé ton cadavre
 Et à ma vingtième année j'ai hérité de tes 400 dollars d'économie
 Je possède aussi la boîte à biscuits qui te servait de reliquaire
 Elle est en fer-blanc
 Toute ta pauvre religion

(CP 248)

He also inherits a uniform button, a Kabyle pipe (a touch of the exotic, the Kabyle people being Algerian Berbers, indicating that Uncle Number One may have traveled widely before his death in Galveston), some cocoa beans, some watercolors painted by his uncle, and photos of prize bulls, in one of which the uncle can be seen “en bras de chemise avec un tablier blanc” (CP 248). It's a paltry inheritance in material terms, but means more, of course, than the sum of its itemized parts.

Next comes Uncle Number Two. The letter's arrival is dramatized: the poet is away at school (“Vous m'avez envoyé dans tous les pensionnats d'Europe”) when a letter

is slid under his door. “Comment voulez-vous que je prépare des examens,” he wonders, and turns instead to the letter and its “belle pédagogie.” This uncle is writing from Alaska (so that makes two uncles so far who have ended up in America), where he is prospecting for gold three days away from his nearest neighbor, and where he has married a woman who bakes the best bread in the district. His gold-hunting is only marginally successful. He has three frostbitten fingers. “La vie non plus ne se paye pas à sa valeur!” he laments (CP 249). And then comes the refrain, the something else, the sadness and the homesickness.

Uncle Number Two’s outside-the-letter story, as dreamed or created or retold by the poet, involves him stealing horses, running away from home, sailing to America aboard a tramp steamer, riding the rails and breaking a leg jumping from a moving train, and being sent to jail for robbing a stagecoach. He also, apparently, “faisais des poésies inspirées de Musset.” He travels to San Francisco, where he reads the story of General Suter, “qui a conquis la Californie aux États-Unis / Et qui, milliardaire, a été ruiné par la découverte des mines d’or sur ses terres” (CP 249). This marks the earliest reference to Johan August Suter in Cendrars’ published work (though he was mentioned in letters many years earlier), and is another indication that Cendrars was thinking about Suter long before the 1925 publication of his novel *L’Or*. Uncle Number Two meets no better a fate than Number One, being found shot through the head, his wife gone: “Ta femme s’est remariée depuis avec un riche fabricant de confitures.” Thus ends the story of Uncle Number Two.

In between the letters of the second and third uncles, the poets ruminates on his own predicament—no longer playing under a table in his mother’s house, but out in the

wide world, “sponging” his way (this is the verb translator Ron Padgett employs for Cendrars’ “Vivre de la tape”), sometimes in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, other times in Leopoldville or Nazareth or Bessarabia or Samoa; but no matter where he is, he says that the gears of his mind turn without ceasing: “Je tourne dans la cage des méridiens comme un écureuil dans la sienne” (CP 250). Amid the engines that continuously “s’appliquent de bonnes claques,” beside “Un Américain les doigts tachés d’encre bat la mesure,” he makes a crossing, experiencing a baptism of the line.

En route, the poet brings out the last letter of Uncle Number Three (he claims he brings it out only because he did not bring enough toilet paper). It bears the postmark of Papeete, Tahiti, and is dated September 1, 1887, the day of Freddy Sauser’s birth, suggesting once more, and perhaps more strongly than before, that the uncles are all manifestations of Cendrars himself. The letter is addressed to the uncle’s sister, Cendrars’ mother. It begins with “Ma sœur, ma très chère sœur / Je suis bouddhiste membre d’une secte politique / Je suis ici pour faire des achats de dynamite / On en vend chez les épiciers comme chez vous la chicorée / Par petits paquets” (CP 251). He says his aim is to return to Bombay and blow up the English. He anticipates that he will never see his sister again because “things are getting hot” (in Padgett’s translation; “Ça chauffe” in the original). Then, for the third time, the refrain: “Et il y avait encore quelque chose / La tristesse / Et le mal du pays” (CP 251).

The poet then narrates Uncle Number Three’s vagabondage, which takes him from life as a “cute kid” who “really knew how to play the cornet” (though even then he “preferred the whining of bombs to evening-dress symphonies”) to building railroads in India (where Moses-like he knocked down his crew boss) to a twelve-year period of

absence in which there was no word from him at all. During these years, he learned “bengali et l’urlu pour apprendre à fabriquer les bombes” (interestingly, given many later chances to correct “l’urlu,” which is a nonsense word, to “l’ourdo”/Urdu, which makes more sense in the context of learning an actual language that might be used in that part of the world, Cendrars declined to do so, letting “l’urlu” stand. Might this be his sly way of reinforcing the fictive/imaginative/fabulistic nature of the entire enterprise?) (CP 251). The poet has never seen Uncle Number Three, and never will, but imagines that he must have a long scar across his forehead.

Uncle Number Four’s letters came rarely. He fought in the Boer War and was a valet to General Robertson. If this general is meant to be Sir William Robertson, then he was not a general at the time of the Second Boer War, but only a colonel. By the time of the First World War, he had been promoted to Chief of the Imperial General Staff, a role he held from 1916 to 1918. As an Allied combatant on the Western Front himself, Cendrars would have, no doubt, known Robertson’s name. In any case, Uncle Number Four’s letters are perfunctory and practical, relating news of increases in his salary and describing his daily tasks attending Robertson. Despite the unemotional tone of the letters, the poet says that he knows there was still something else—sadness and homesickness, as is the case with the other uncles.

Uncle Number Four writes the least imaginative letters, but he is the only one of the seven whom the poet ever meets in person. He is even named—Uncle Jean—whereas the other six are not. The poet tells us that Uncle Jean returns from the war very ill, with “un grand coffre en cuir d’hippopotame qui était toujours bouclé” (CP 252). He shuts himself up in his room, where the poet glimpses him asleep, his face full of suffering.

His beard is long. He sleeps for two weeks, then emerges in a homicidal rage, wanting to kill his own mother. He is sent to an asylum. The poet sees him twice more: once in the asylum, strapped into a straitjacket, and for the last time at his funeral. The poet writes that “Tu n’as aimé que deux choses au monde / Un cacatoès / Et les ongles roses de Son Excellence” (CP 252).

Uncle Number Five is the head cook at the Club Hotel in Chicago (another uncle who has landed in America, perhaps indicating Cendrars’ own attraction to the United States), with 400 kitchen boys working under him. Like the other uncles, he too seems to have knocked around the world, giving addresses at “Tunis etc.” and “Biarritz etc.” Despite the uncle’s wanderings and his distance from home, the poet tells us that he is the only one who never felt homesick. Though he writes from Chicago, “On ne sait jamais où tu es / Tu n’aimes pas rester en place” (CP 253). He has invented a number of dishes, some of which bear his name, and “Il paraît que tu possèdes une *Histoire de la Cuisine à travers tous les âges et chez tous les peuples* / En 12 vol. in-8⁰” (CP 253). Much as the market quotations have become our daily prayers, so too the menus of Uncle Number Five “sont la poésie nouvelle” (CP 253).

Then we are (seemingly) back to the poet himself, in stanzas that form an interruption between uncles five and six. “J’ai quitté tout cela,” Cendrars writes. “J’attends / La guillotine est le chef-d’œuvre de l’art plastique / Son déclic / Mouvement perpétuel” (CP 253). He seems to be in Paris, “Derrière l’Opéra,” where “Les chants de la lumière ébranlent les tours / Les couleurs croulent sur la ville / Affiche plus grande que toi et moi” (CP 255), but then just as quickly, in the rapid pace of the text anyway, he departs (“En toute!” “Paris-adieux”), using the Eiffel Tower as a portal through which he

can leapfrog to the other side of the globe. “Puis on continue,” writes Cendrars, and what he goes on to is a world of rich Peruvian owners of guano businesses, beautiful buxom women, iced drinks on terraces, torpedo boats, polo games, an observatory on the slopes of a volcano, snakes in a dried-up riverbed, a cross-eyed Indian girl prostituting herself in Buenos Aires, a German musician who borrows his silver-handled riding crop and suede gloves, a fat Dutchman who is a geographer, and a Malaysian woman celebrating her birthday. The effect of the list is disorienting. It may be that the poet is in South America, though it seems to be a South America of the imagination rather than the actual, geographical continent.

Along the way, he receives a package containing a letter from his sixth uncle. “Attends-moi à la factorerie jusqu’au printemps prochain,” writes Uncle Number Six. “Amuse-toi bien bois sec et n’épargne pas les femmes” (CP 255). And again, there was something else. Sadness and homesickness.

“Oh mon oncle,” Cendrars writes. “Je t’ai attendu un an et tu n’es pas venu” (CP 256). He had left for Patagonia in the company of a group of astronomers, or so the poet tells us. He expertly sights the horizon with a sextant and gathers “mousses protozoaires en dérive entre deux eaux à la lueur des poisons électriques.” He collects meteorites and has a strange, mystical experience:

Un dimanche matin:

Tu vis un évêque mitré sortir des eaux

Il avait une queue de poisson et t’aspergeait de signes de croix

Tu t’es enfui dans la montagne en hurlant comme un vari blessé

La nuit même
 Un ouragan détruisit le campement
 Tes compagnons durent renoncer à l'espoir de te retrouver vivant
 Ils emportèrent soigneusement les documents scientifiques
 Et au bout de trois mois,
 Les pauvres intellectuels,
 Ils arrivèrent un soir à un feu de gauchos où l'on causait justement de toi
(CP 256)

The poet has come to meet him, but by that time Uncle Number Five has disappeared, apparently for good.

Last numerically, but perhaps first in significance, as suggested above, comes Uncle Number Seven. The poet tells us that no one ever knew what happened to him. He's been absorbed, so to speak, into the universe and into the poet's life as well. The absorption is complete to the extent that Cendrars writes "On dit que je te ressemble" (CP 257). Then follows the dedication to Monsieur Bertrand, "Dernier Français de Panama," according to the poet, and a long, exquisite passage on the decaying remains of the French expedition in Panama:

Envoyez-vous la photographie de la forêt de chêne-liège qui pousse sur les
 400 locomotives abandonnées par l'entreprise française
 Cadavres-vivants
 Le palmier greffé dans la banne d'une grue chargée d'orchidées

Les canons d'Aspinwall rongés par les toucans
 La drague aux tortues
 Les pumas qui nichent dans le gazomètre défoncé
 Les écluses perforées par les poissons-scie
 La tuyauterie des pompes bouchée par une colonie d'iguanes
 Les trains arrêtés par l'invasion des chenilles
 Et l'ancre gigantesque aux armoires de Louis XV dont vous n'avez su
 m'expliquer la présence dans la forêt
 Tous les ans vous changez les portes de votre établissement incrustées de
 signatures
 Tous ceux qui passèrent chez vous
 Ces 32 portes quel témoignage
 Langues vivantes de ce sacré canal que vous chérissez tant

(CP 257)

In this zone of failure and death life persists, and from its fecund moldering new life emerges. Monsieur Bertrand/Uncle Number Seven doesn't suffer from the homesickness afflicting the others, for despite being far from home, he is at the center of his world. He carries his home with him. From there, the world emerges daily.

In that spirit, Cendrars writes that "Ce matin est le premier jour du monde." The poet is on the isthmus from which "on voit simultanément tous les astres du ciel et toutes les formes de la végétation." He is in a place of "Préexcellence des montagnes équatoriales / Zone unique" (CP 257). Life aboard steamships and passenger trains is

teaching him “à épeler l’A B C de la vie sous la férule des sirènes en partance.” He has some bread and cheese, and a clean collar. “La poésie date d’aujourd’hui,” he writes (CP 258). He wears the Milky Way around his neck (a collar? A noose? Both?) and the two hemispheres of the globe on his eyes. He is transformed into the global man, even the cosmic man. And yet, still,

J’ai le mal du pays

Je suis tous les visages et j’ai peur des boîtes aux lettres

Les villes sont des ventres

Je ne suis plus le voies

Lignes

Câbles

Canaux

Ni les ponts suspendus!

(CP 258)

Where does all of this newfound consciousness, this transformation, lead him? Back to Paris, to the Rotonde, at the bottom of a glass, where “Les cancons littéraires vont leur train,” for, after all, “Vous avez encore tous un beau rôle à jouer.” There is nothing to do but wait, so he waits. It is, paradoxically, noon at two P.M; “Rien et partout.”

The last words of *Le Panama* list its dates of composition— “Juin 1913-Juin 1914”—and a series of places, presumably places where the poem was written, all of which are Paris and its suburbs: “PARIS ET SA BANLIEU. Saint-Cloud, Sèvres,

Montmorency, Courbevoie, Bougival, Rueil, Montrouge, Saint-Denis, Vincennes, Étampes, Melun, Saint-Martin, Méréville, Barbizon, Forges-en-Bière” (CP 258). This list of towns indicates that for all the poem’s globetrotting, the poet, while writing, never left Paris and its general surroundings. *Le Panama* is thus, for all the experiences described in it, not a work derived from experience, but a powerful leap of the imagination. The poet is the relatively still center around which the poem whirls, “rien et partout,” a nothing that is not at all the contrary of something, a positive absence more Eastern in spirit than Western. Henry Miller came close to describing this nearly indescribable stance when, in his introduction to the *Selected Writings of Blaise Cendrars* (New Directions, 1966), he wrote:

Out of desperation and humility he had created for himself the most human role of the antagonist . . . He refused to spread himself thin over an illusory pattern of grandeur; he muscled deeper and deeper into the hub, into the everlasting no-principle of the universe.

(x)

Cendrars was a contemplative for whom the world was a cloister, a solitary most at home among his fellow humans. As early as 1919, he was being called the poet *Du Monde entier* (and this in fact was the title given to his poetry collection published in that year by the NRF), but “we are not thinking of him as an escapist, the man running away from himself, but quite the contrary, the man running to everything, curious about life in all its manifestations because these cannot but have a bearing on his own life” (DR 120). *Le*

Panama is an early example of the ways in which he teases out and lives through these seeming contradictions, and the traits of the contemplative-in-motion would grow and become more apparent throughout the course of his writing life, culminating in the autobiographical prose tetralogy of the 1940s. The range and sweep of those books is stunning, and yet they were written (and perhaps could only have been written) while Cendrars was in internal exile in Aix-en-Provence, being watched closely by the Nazis, under virtual house arrest.

1919 was the occasion of Cendrars' first publication in America: his striking, short prose piece *I Have Killed* (*J'ai tué*), which describes an action on the Western Front in which the narrator, an Allied soldier, pursues a German adversary into a barn, battles with him hand-to-hand, and kills him. It was translated by Harold Ward and printed in the May/June issue of *The Plowshare*, a fine art, letterpress publication out of Woodstock, New York. The piece was published accompanied by five illustrations by Fernand Léger. Though how Cendrars' work ended up in this obscure American publication (copies of which are exceedingly rare today) isn't quite clear, a possible clue can be found in William Carlos Williams' *Autobiography*, in which he claims he met Blaise Cendrars at a gathering of artists and writers in New York around 1919. As Jay Bochner writes in his essay "Vol D'Amérique," included in the collection *Le Premier Siècle de Cendrars* (1987):

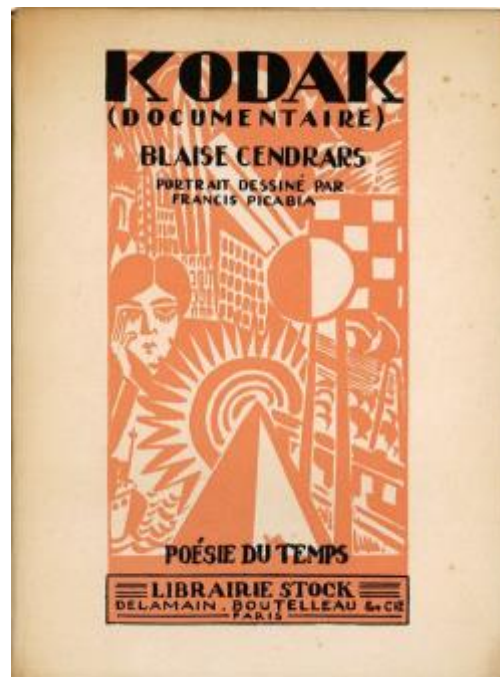
C'est un des indices—il y en a quelques-uns—qui nous permet de croire que Cendrars aurait pu se trouver à New York à cette époque; mais dans

l'état présent de nos connaissances sur ses allées et venues cela semble difficile à prouver. Il est plutôt probable que ces deux poètes, qui se ressemblent tant au niveau de l'influence qu'ils ont eue sur la poésie de leurs pays respectif ne se rencontrèrent jamais et, surtout, n'eurent guère d'influence l'un sur l'autre . . . Bien connus et toujours proches des grands prêtres de la modernité, ces deux écrivains étaient jaloux de leur indépendance qui les poussait dans un modernisme différent que l'on pourrait qualifier de « délinquant », et qui va s'exprimer vers 1923 dans le choix d'un sujet particulier: l'Amérique.

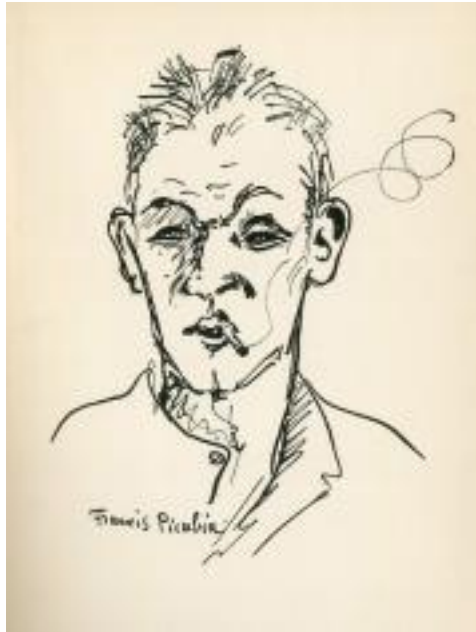
(169)

The difficulty, even the outright impossibility, of tracking all of Cendrars' comings and goings after about 1920 is quite real, and renders his biography from this point forward more a series of broad strokes than a finely-detailed portrait. Complicating matters further is his tendency to mythologize his own life, telling and retelling it in multiple variations over the decades. As Monique Cheddor writes in her Introduction to the English-language Cendrars collection *Modernities and Other Writings* (University of Nebraska Press, 1992), "Any attempt to unravel fact from fiction in Cendrars' writings would, then, be a gross misunderstanding of the transmutative power of his work" (xiii). Some would call him a fantastic liar, and that he may well have been, but I prefer to think of Cendrars not only as "le poète du monde entier," but also as the poet of his own existence; a Whitmanian writing a song of himself at the same time that he knocks about the globe, writing its song too.

Between 1919 and 1924, Cendrars published three books of poetry, most of which he had written before 1918: *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* (Au Sans Pareil, 1919), *Kodak (Documentaire)* (Stock, 1924), and *Feuilles de route* (Au Sans Pareil, 1924). The title of the latter seems a clear nod to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, though Cendrars has transformed it to indicate motion and travel. *Kodak*, as mentioned previously, comprised poems which, years later, were revealed to have been cut-ups of the text of a pulp novel by Gustave Le Rouge, a writer whom Cendrars admired immensely. It was also the cause of a small scandal; shortly after its publication, Cendrars and his publisher were threatened with legal action by the Eastman-Kodak company, who claimed that the title and design of the book infringed on their trademark rights. The title was changed to *Documentaires*, and today the book is usually referred to as *Kodak (Documentaires)*. Here is the cover of the original edition, with cover design by Frans Masereel:



And here is the frontispiece portrait of Cendrars by Francis Picabia:



Picabia and Cendrars had a long and fruitful friendship, having met in Paris before the First World War, and in 1923 they collaborated on a stage production for the Ballets Suédois titled *La Création du monde*, for which Cendrars wrote the scenario and Picabia designed the sets.

In the period between 1919 and 1924, Cendrars also published prose, including the short, surrealistic *La Fin du monde filmée par l'Ange Notre-Dame* (La Sirène, 1921), and a collection of African folktales, *Anthologie nègre* (La Sirène, 1921). He also worked as an editor and publisher at La Sirène, alongside Jean Cocteau, producing Apollinaire's *Flâneur des deux rives* and *Le Bestiaire ou le cortège d'Orphée* (the latter being illustrated by Raoul Dufy), Baudelaire's *Mon cœur mis à nu*, Stravinsky's *Rag-Time* (with a cover drawing by Picasso), Lautréamont's *Les Chants du Maldoror*, Rémy de

Gourmont's *Pensées inédites*, the first translation of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and many others. Of particular note are the deluxe sets produced by La Sirène: an edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* copiously illustrated by Kees Van Dongen which sold for 1,200 francs, and Casanova's *Mémoires* in 12 volumes with 270 period reproductions and a bevy of scholarly and historical notes.

In addition to all of the writing, editing, and publishing work Cendrars did between his exit from the war and 1924, there was also his extensive work in the film industry, mostly with Abel Gance. In 1917-18 he worked with Gance on *J'accuse* (1919), and after that was Gance's assistant on *La Roue* (1923). Discussing *J'accuse* with Michael Manoll, Cendrars said:

Dans *J'accuse*, je faisais tout: l'homme de peine, l'accessoiriste, l'électricien, l'artificier, le costumier, de la figuration et de la régie, l'aide opérateur, le vice-metteur en scène, le chauffeur du patron, le comptable, le caissier et dans *Les Morts qui reviennent*, je faisais un macchabée, tout empoissé dans l'hémoglobine de cheval car on m'avait fait perdre mon bras une deuxième fois pour les besoins de la prise de vue.

(OC 8: 172)

La Roue, widely considered, along with *Napoléon*, to be Gance's masterpiece, took some two years to film, and required Cendrars to travel to Nice, Chamonix, Grenoble, and

elsewhere. Cendrars assigned the task of composing the film's music to Arthur Honegger, and some of that music later became known as Honegger's piece *Pacific 231*.

The question of how much influence Cendrars had on *La Roue* is an interesting one. Certainly, trains are of vital importance in the film, and Cendrars' affinity for trains and train travel is well-established. Many critics have assumed that Cendrars was the film's editor, and thus responsible for the innovative jump-cutting that made *La Roue* an avant-garde classic some four years before Eisenstein's *Potemkin*. Ezra Pound, writing on *La Roue* in the March 1923 issue of *The Dial*, certainly thought this was the case:

Thanks, we presume, to Blaise Cendrars, there are interesting moments, and effects which belong perhaps only to the cinema. At least for the sake of argument we can admit that they are essentially cinematographic and not merely a travesty and degradation of some other art. The bits of machinery, the varying speeds, the tricks of the reproducing machine are admirably exploited, according to pictorial concepts derived from contemporary abstract painters.

(273)

Cendrars then did unspecified film work for others, including some time spent in Vienna, before traveling to London and then Rome to work on his own film, *La Vénus noire*. In Rome, he met the American author Sinclair Lewis. Though at least some of the film was shot, it was never completed, and what footage existed has been lost. Cendrars left Rome, troubled by the rise of Mussolini, who had become Prime Minister in 1922. Though

Cendrars' involvement in film lasted only a few years, he left his mark, especially when one considers the profound impact of the editing techniques he may well have had a hand in pioneering.

In Cendrars' personal life, the period between the end of the war and 1924 was not easy. He and Féla had their third child, Miriam, who was born in England on December 23, 1919. Blaise was seldom with Féla and the children, and she was left to raise them by herself, though many sympathetic friends, including Sonia Delaunay, helped where and how they could. Miriam and Blaise did not meet face to face until the 1940s. Miriam would go on to be active in the French Resistance during the Second World War, and later became one of the world's greatest advocates for her father's work, writing and speaking extensively about him. She edited and shepherded to publication Blaise's *Inédits* (1969) and his correspondence with Henry Miller (1995), and in 1984 she published her definitive biography, *Blaise Cendrars*. She remains the preeminent Cendrars expert in the world today.

CHAPTER THREE

L'OR

From 1924 until 1939, Cendrars' primary residence was at Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre, a village some 30 miles west of Paris. His house was called "L'Oustaou," meaning "house" in Provençal. During these years, Le Tremblay attracted many artists and writers; Picabia, René Hilsum, Ambroise Vollard, Rouault, Picasso, and silent film comedian Marcel Lévesque all lived there at one time or another. Le Tremblay was more of an occasional than a permanent residence for Cendrars, a place to which he went when he needed to write and decompress from travels. For instance, between 1924 and 1929 he was in Brazil five different times, and also traveled to Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, and possibly as far as Patagonia and the Antarctic (his 1929 novel *Le Plan de l'Aiguille* concerns a doomed expedition to Antarctica). In between trips, he would return to Le Tremblay. Such was the case with his first novel, *L'Or, la merveilleuse histoire du général Johann August Suter*, which he wrote at Le Tremblay between November 22 and December 31, 1924. The book was published by Grasset in 1925.

As mentioned earlier, the story of Johann August Suter had been on Cendrars' mind for many years. As far back as 1912, he had been corresponding with his friend and former schoolmate August Suter, about Suter's famous grandfather, Johann August. He'd requested rare and archival documents pertaining to the elder Suter's story, indicating that *L'Or* was gestating for more than a decade before it was written. Cendrars mentions

Johann August Suter in the text of *Le Panama*, further indicating how intrigued he was with the story.

L'Or indicates not only a shift of genre from poetry to prose, but a shift in style as well. Whereas his three great poems, *Les Pâques*, *Le Transsibérien*, and *Le Panama*, were all maximalist, overflowing, frenetic, kinetic works, *L'Or* is telegraphic in its syntax. For a prose work classified as a novel, it is short, covering only 128 pages in the second volume of the Denoël edition of Cendrars' collected works. It should perhaps be more properly classified as a novella, though the distinction between novel and novella may be unimportant here. The book reads like a novel, though its epic sweep across time and space is rendered in a highly compressed form. It is broken into 74 sections, some of which are merely a paragraph in length and others of which span several pages. The style is clipped and direct, showing no evidence of the global and cosmic flights of fancy that had characterized Cendrars' previous, poetic efforts.

The book begins with two epigraphs, both from Cendrars himself. First are the lines from *Le Panama* that mention Suter ("C'est là que tu lisais l'histoire du général Suter qui a conquis la Californie," etc.), followed by this sentence: "Une autre histoire est celle des 900 millions citée dans 'Le Panama' ainsi que l'histoire du Général Suter que j'écrirai un jour ou que je reprendrai ici, — plus tard, si je ne la publie pas auparavant. Blaise Cendrars: *Pro Domo*, 1918" (OC 2: 113). The first section takes place on May 6, 1834, in the village of Rünenberg in the canton of Basle. The day is hot, and the area has been suffering from drought for some time. Old men smoke pipes on their doorsteps, old women knit, and the children play out of doors. Just as the sun is setting, "Ces paisibles campagnards bâlois furent tout à coup mis en émoi par l'arrivée d'un étranger. Même en

plein jour, un étranger est quelque chose de rare dans ce petit village de Rünenberg; mais que dire d'un étranger qui s'amène à une heure indue, le soir, si tard, juste avant le coucher de soleil?" (OC 2: 117). Already, the story is living up to its subtitle, "la merveilleuse histoire," since the arrival of a stranger is a well-known trope of myths and legends from the classical world and from European folk and fairy tales such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm. The stranger walks through the town, hardly glancing at the villagers, and goes directly to the Mayor's house. Before long, he emerges, seeming weary and carrying his hat in his hand. He passes back through the square, stopping to give a little boy a coin, and spits into the fountain as he walks by it. "Tout le village le contemplait maintenant. Les buveurs étaient debout," writes Cendrars. "Mais l'étranger ne leur jeta même pas un regard, il regrimpa dans la carriole qui l'avait amené et disparut bientôt en prenant la route plantée de sorbiers qui mène au chef-lieu du canton" (OC 2: 117). The "brusque apparition et ce départ précipité" causes great consternation among the villagers. They examine closely the silver coin given to the boy. They discuss whether or not they should alert the surrounding villages, even organize a manhunt. Soon, word goes around that the stranger had sought a certificate of origin and a passport from the mayor, claiming to be a native of the commune. The mayor had denied him, having never set eyes on him before.

Then Cendrars inserts a bit of dramatized dialogue, writing that it took place "le lendemain matin dans le cabinet du secrétaire de police, à Liesthal, chef-lieu du Canton. Il était à peine onze heures." The upshot of the conversation between Kloss, the Secretary of Police, and the old Clerk of the Court is that the police refuse to issue a passport to

Johann August Suter. The clerk vouches for Suter, but the certificate of origin is missing, so the Secretary of Police will not accede to the request.

Section two begins with the following sentence: “Johann August Suter venait d’abandonner sa femme et ses quatre enfants” (OC 2: 118). After this quasi-journalistic, factual revelation, Cendrars resumes narration of Suter’s flight, describing how he crosses from Switzerland into France on foot, wandering for two days without food. In desperation, he milks a cow into his hat and drinks it down. He finds “la première fraise de l’année et devait s’en souvenir longtemps” (OC 2: 119).

Section three gives us Suter’s backstory. He is thirty-one years old. He was born in 1803 at Kandern in the Grand-Duchy of Baden, into a family of paper-makers who passed down manufacturing secrets from generation to generation until the family became famous throughout Europe for their products. An uncle of Johann August Suter

avait fait la contrebande des pamphlets et des brochures révolutionnaires, passant d’énormes ballots d’imprimés de Suisse en Alsace et les distribuant dans le pays entre Altkirch et Strasbourg, ce qui lui avait valu de pouvoir assister à Paris, à titre de « fameux colporteur », aux journées de la Terreur de 1793 et de 1794, dont il a laissé un mémorial plein de détails inédits.

(OC 2: 120)

This sort of documentary material is interspersed throughout *L’Or*, lending it an air of authenticity despite the fact of its being a “marvelous tale.” Writing about the Suter

family, Cendrars turns from Johann's ancestors to his descendants, saying that "Aujourd'hui encore," one of the last descendants, Gottlieb Suter, still works as a bookbinder in Basel. However, Gottlieb is "un peu fou, court les sects," beats his children, and spends hours drinking and holding forth in the taverns, often forgetting to go home. As Cendrars puts it, "Depuis le Général, tous les Suter sont comme ça." After General Suter, the family line descends into madness and violence. One wonders if William Faulkner took note of this as he read *L'Or* and worked on its screenplay adaptation, given the similar pattern of the Sutpen family in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In section three, Suter is near Besançon, where he encounters a group of young Germans making a tour of France. He travels with them to Autun where, after a night of drinking, he robs some of them of their money and clothing. Then he sets out for Paris at a rapid pace. There, he goes to a paper merchant in the Marais who is one of his father's best clients, presents a forged letter of credit, receives cash, and uses the proceeds to make his way to the coast at Le Havre, where he boards a paddle steamer called *l'Espérance*, which is making its maiden voyage. Its destination is New York. "A bord, il y a Johann August Suter, banqueroutier, fuyard, rôdeur, vagabond, voleur, escroc," writes Cendrars. "Il a la tête haute et débouche une bouteille de vin." And concluding chapter one, Cendrars describes telescopically, in summary, precise language, much of what is to follow:

C'est là qu'il disparaît dans les brouillards de la Manche par temps qui crachote et mer qui roule sec. Au pays, on n'entend plus parler de lui et sa

femme reste quatorze ans sans avoir de ses nouvelles. Et, tout à coup, son nom est prononcé avec étonnement dans le monde entier.

C'est ici que commence la merveilleuse histoire du général Johann August Suter.

C'est un dimanche.

(OC 2: 121)

There is much that can be said about this first chapter. Though it trades in stereotypes, it does so with purpose. The mysterious stranger, the suspicious villagers, and the bucolic setting in the Alps all verge on cliché, and yet the writing is quite far from conventional. Cendrars' prose varies from lengthy, descriptive sentences overfilled with detail to absolutely telegraphic sentences ("C'est un dimanche.") that resemble, at least typographically, poetry more than prose. It's already apparent in Chapter 1 that Cendrars is going to bounce back and forth between various stylistic and aesthetic poles, sometimes jarringly. Why, we might ask, would a "marvelous history" offer mundane details such as the day of the week on which a particular scene takes place? Michèle Touret, in her 1999 book *Blaise Cendrars: Le Désir du Roman*, offers a possible answer when she observes that "*L'Or* se présente à la fois comme un récit romanesque et comme son contraire" (174). Of the first chapter in particular, Touret writes "Ces tableaux stéréotypés, ces phrases brèves, simples, ces descriptions génériques: ce n'est pas une description, c'est le cliché de la description, une description de description" (175). In

L'Or, his first novel, *Cendrars* seems to be toying with the conventions of the novel genre itself.

Chapter Two begins with the same telegraphy with which the first chapter ends: “Le port. Le port de New-York. 1834” (OC 2: 124). Then, immediately, *Cendrars* shifts into one of the maximalist, long lists for which his prose would become well-known:

C'est là que débarquent tous les naufragés du vieux monde. Les naufragés, les malheureux, les mécontents. Les hommes libres, les insoumis. Ceux qui ont eu des revers de fortune; ceux qui ont tout risqué sur une seule carte; ceux qu'une passion romantique a bouleversés. Les premiers socialistes allemands, les premiers mystiques russes. Les idéologues que les polices d'Europe traquent; ceux que la réaction chasse. Les petits artisans, premières victimes de la grosse industrie en formation. Les phalanstériens français, les carbonari, les derniers disciples de Saint-Martin, le philosophe inconnu, et des Écossais. Des esprits généreux, des têtes fêlées. Des brigands de Calabre, des patriotes hellènes. Les paysans d'Irlande et de Scandinavie. Des individus et des peuples victimes des guerres napoléoniennes et sacrifiés par les congrès diplomatiques. Les carlistes, les Polonais, les partisans de Hongrie. Les illuminés de toutes les révolutions de 1830 et les derniers libéraux qui quittent leur patrie pour rallier la grande République, ouvriers, soldats, marchands, banquiers de tous les pays, même sud-américains, complices de Bolivar. Depuis la Révolution française, depuis la déclaration de l'Indépendance (27 ans

avant l'élection de Lincoln à la Présidence), en pleine croissance, en plein épanouissement, jamais New-York n'a vu ses quais aussi continuellement envahis.

(OC 2: 124)

Whereas Cendrars' descriptions of immigrants to New York in "Les Pâques" showed them as downtrodden and oppressed (and the poet certainly counted himself among them), the scene he paints of the immigrant community in the New York of 1834 is very different: a world of seekers and strivers, of revolutionaries and people of action. Sutter fits in well among them.

Sutter's first job, if it could be called that, is as a pickpocket and tout in the employ of a Mr. Haberposch (one of Cendrars' schoolmates was named Haberbosch—see page 13 of this dissertation). Then, after three months, he's working as a delivery boy, packer, and bookkeeper for a Mr. Hagelstroem, "l'inventeur des allumettes suédoises." He has left the immediate vicinity of the port and has gone further into the city. "Comme toute la civilisation américaine," Cendrars writes, "il se déplace lentement vers l'ouest" (OC 2: 126). We are given a long list of the jobs Sutter works, as well as the languages he learns, during his first two years in America:

Il travaille chez un drapier, chez un droguiste, dans une charcuterie. Il s'associe avec un Roumain et fait du colportage. Il est palefrenier dans un cirque. Puis maréchal-ferrant, dentiste, empailleur, vend la rose de Jéricho dans une voiture dorée, s'établit tailleur pour dames, travaille dans une

scierie, boxe un nègre géant et gagne un esclave et une bourse de cent guinées, remange de la vache enragée, enseigne les mathématiques chez les Pères de la Mission, apprend l'anglais, le français, le hongrois, le portugais, le petit nègre de Louisiane, le sioux, le comanche, le slang, l'espagnol . . .

(OC 2: 126)

The list is dizzying, and frankly impossible. What to make of it? Touret offers a useful interpretation:

La stéréotypie se dénonce d'elle-même par ses dérives ou ses excès. Les situations évoquées sont escamotées sous les apparences de la couleur locale maximale à l'arrivée de Suter à New York. Autre stéréotype détruit par son excès même: la figure classique de l'émigrant qui apprend le pays où il va vivre et entreprend de faire fortune en pratiquant tous les métiers: en deux ans, Suter fait toutes sortes de métiers. Cendrars brouille les pistes de la référence temporelle par des ambiguïtés stylistiques, et énumère une liste de métiers—non des occupations mais des métiers qui impliquent un savoir-faire (tailleur, empailleur)—, il établit la liste des langues apprises par Suter—neuf à total—. Cette accumulation, signe excessif, signe de la parodie, invite à une lecture double et à une dérive par rapport au contrat de départ. Entre le sens de *Histoire* et le sens de *Merveille*, contenus dans

le sous-titre, le récit oscillera toujours, posant et déniaut son sens par un balancement continuel.

(176)

On Touret's reading (one with which I agree), *L'Or* consistently treads a double path, that of the conventional novel and that of parody. It is, in this sense, a parody of parodies, a new and fresh sort of writing masquerading as a novel, using the tropes and clichés of immigrant fiction, the American Western, and other stock types of books as its ground.

One should also consider the autobiographical undertones of *L'Or*. If the list of Sutter's diverse trades, occupations, and languages seems hard to swallow, then the various lists of occupations Cendrars gave for himself over the decades are even more fantastical. As he told Michel Manoll in *Blaise Cendrars vous parle . . .*, "J'ai déjà fait trente-six métiers et je suis prêt, dès demain matin, à recommencer tout autre chose" (OC 8: 553). Alongside readily verifiable claims, such as his military service, his work in film and so on, Cendrars also asserted that he had worked as a juggler on the stages of English music halls with a then-unknown Charlie Chaplin, invented various aeronautical devices, been a pearl merchant and a smuggler, and had owned and farmed and subsequently lost three South American plantations. There is something of Cendrars in the Sutter character, to be sure, but the autobiographical approach to the novel is of only passing interest. As Cendrars himself said to Michel Manoll, speaking of the "vrai roman" he was writing at the time of the 1952 interview (*Emmène-moi au bout du monde!*, which would be published in 1956),

J'écrirai un roman-roman et je n'y paraîtrai parce qu'on ne voit plus qu'un seul personnage dans mes livres: Cendrars! C'est pas malin. *L'Or*, c'est Cendrars. *Moravagine*, c'est Cendrars. *Dan Yack*, c'est Cendrars. On m'embête avec ce Cendrars-là! Il ne faut tout de même pas croire que le romancier est incarné dans ses personnages.

Le plus gros danger pour un écrivain c'est d'être victime de sa légende, de se prendre à son propre piège.

(OC 8: 576)

In short, *L'Or* is no more and no less autobiographical than most of Cendrars' other works; therefore, delving into its autobiographical elements sheds little light on the novel. Investigating how and why the novel works, and examining its broader cultural impact, both in the United States and around the world, is a far more fruitful approach.

Sutter spends two years in New York, plying these various trades and gaining knowledge not only of languages and customs, but also of the geography of the city, the pulse of its business ventures and its fortunes lost and gained, and the ever-increasing outward flow of its population to the thinly-settled territories of the West. "Il a plus d'un itinéraire en tête, à vent de plusieurs mines d'or, est le seul à connaître certaines pistes perdues," writes Cendrars (OC 2: 127). He begins to invest in expeditions, then decides to undertake one himself. He joins forces with a group of German merchants who are leaving New York for St. Louis.

In Missouri, Sutter buys a piece of land and begins to farm. He keeps his house open to travelers, and gathers information from them. At first, these visits are by chance, but before long Sutter has figured out a way to route people to his riverside inn:

Une barque armée, montée d’esclaves noirs, arraisonne les bateaux qui passent et les mène à l’estacade. L’accueil est tel que la maison ne désemplit pas; aventuriers, colons, trappeurs qui descendent chargés de butins ou misérables, tous également heureux de se refaire là et de se remettre des fatigues de la brousse et des prairies; chercheurs de fortune, casse-cous, têtes brulées qui remontent, la fièvre aux yeux, mystérieux, secrets.

(OC 2: 128)

Amid drinking and merriment, Sutter interrogates his guests, learning much. “Il se souvient de tout et n’oublie pas un nom propre, de col, rivière, montagne ou lieux dits: l’Arbre Sec, les Trois Cornes, le Gué Mauvais” (OC 2: 128). And always these travelers speak of the West: of unbelievably fertile lands, seemingly endless dry steppes, and towering mountain ranges, of places where the fruit is made of gold and silver, of lands toward which many depart but few arrive, most dying along the way. Finally, the rumors and stories are too much for Sutter to hear anymore. He sells his farm and all his possessions for cash. “Johann August Suter est un homme d’action,” after all (OC 2: 129). He joins a group headed to Santa Fe, but ends up striking out on his own when that expedition falls apart. He lives for a time among the Native Americans east of the

Rockies, bartering and trading and acquiring more and more information about what lies beyond. It is there that he first hears the place name that will come to captivate him: California. Chapter Two concludes with the same sort of curt, declarative statement with which Cendrars ended the previous chapter: “Il est hanté” (OC 2: 129).

Chapters Three and Four have Sutter returning to Missouri to gather men and supplies for a great push to California, then traveling overland as far as Fort Vancouver. Along the way the expedition encounters the usual dangers associated with the European exploration of the American West: oceans of grassland, colossal storms, abundant and sometimes threatening wildlife, dangerous mountain peaks and passes, and hostile indigenous peoples (including the “Kooyutt Indians,” which Cendrars either made up entirely or misheard and incorrectly transcribed). By the time he reaches Fort Vancouver, Sutter is alone. The rest of the party has either split off or died. Nevertheless, and despite dire warnings from the garrison of the fort, Sutter decides to press on to California. He does heed one bit of advice, however, and decides to travel to California by sea instead of by land. Cendrars pegs the date of his departure precisely: November 8, 1838.

The ship on which Sutter travels goes first to the Sandwich Islands (Honolulu, to be precise), where he decides to employ a labor force of Melanesians (Cendrars calls them “Kanakas,” a pejorative term). He risks starting a slave trade in “des parages insoupçonnés.” He gains some interested partners, and they all sign the articles of constitution of Sutter’s Pacific Trading Company. In the legal documents, his future land holdings appear under the name “New Helvetia.” While his partners gather the slaves/indentured workers, Sutter sails for California.

Chapter Five begins with a brief summary of the natural history and political situation of California as it was in 1838. The entire territory, ruled by Mexico, has a population of 35,000, according to Cendrars. After this factual aside, the content of which resembles a travel brochure, Cendrars returns to Sutter, who disembarks in San Francisco and makes his way to the Mission Post:

Il met pied à terre devant la poste misérable de la Mission. Un Franciscain miné de fièvre se porte à sa rencontre.

Il est à San Francisco.

Des huttes de pêcheurs en terre battue. Des cochons bleus qui se vautrent au soleil, des truies maigres avec des douzaines de petits.

Voilà ce que Johann August Suter vient conquérir.

(OC 2: 145)

But what is this “here” that Sutter has come to conquer? Cendrars tells us that the Mission Post is one of eighteen such sites scattered from the extreme southernmost part of California up to the north coast. He recounts the details of the friars’ subjugation of Native Americans, who by Sutter’s time have been mostly brought into colonial servitude at and around the missions. Land has been gradually brought under cultivation, and various infrastructure and small-scale manufacturing projects have been set in motion.

Cendrars observes that things changed in 1832, when the Republic of Mexico declared the missions and their settlements to be state property: “Des généraux et des tyranneaux politiques s’adjugent les plus riches domaines, et les Indiens, dépouillés de tout, maltraités, misérables, se retirent dans les solitudes et dans la brousse. Le bien-être et la fortune publique sombrent rapidement” (OC 2: 147). He offers statistics which prove the precipitous decline in workers and livestock between 1832 and 1838. It is into this economic depression and power vacuum that Sutter emerges.

In Chapter Six, at Monterey, Sutter gains a ten-year concession from Governor Alvarado. His first shipload of Kanakas arrives, one hundred and fifty of them. Sutter and his initial settlement party travel up the Sacramento Valley, presenting a somewhat surreal scene:

En tête naviguent 3 ex-baleiniers qui sont encore en tenue de marins et qui ont à bord une petite pièce de canon. Puis, viennent les 150 Canaques vêtus d’une courte chemise à raies transversales qui leur descend jusqu’aux genoux. Ils se sont fait d’étranges petits chapeaux pointus avec les feuilles des tulipiers. Sur la rive et dans les marais, suivent 30 wagons chargés de vivres, de semences, de munitions, une cinquantaine de chevaux, 75 mulets, 5 taureaux, 200 vaches, 5 troupeaux de moutons. L’arrière-garde, à cheval ou en canoë, le rifle en bandoulière, le chapeau de cuir sur l’oreille, est en serre-file et pousse tout le monde dans le mauvais pas.

(OC 2: 151)

Six weeks later, the clearing and burning done by the expedition's workers have transformed the landscape into "un spectacle hallucinant." Oxen and mules work plowing furrows, seed is scattered. Barns, storehouses, granaries, and houses are erected; "Tout est solide, grand, vaste, conçu pour l'avenir" (OC 2: 151). Sutter supervises the work personally, down to the last detail, joining the work-gangs himself when they find themselves a man short. Native Americans who formerly worked at the missions are brought in, supplementing the growing number of Kanakas. They're joined by white men, Mormons, who come for the three dollars a day pay Sutter offers them. Prosperity comes quickly. Soon Sutter's properties boast 4,000 oxen, 1,200 cows, 1,500 horses, and 12,000 sheep. The boundaries of the Sutter domain take several days to circumambulate. Sutter is so prosperous that he is able to buy some additional farms along the coast, near Fort Bodega, paying \$40,000 in cash to the Russians from whom he buys them.

Such prosperity on the frontier cannot go unnoticed, however, and for all his planning and labor, all of which is performed in an isolated, remote land, he cannot avoid the attention of political powers. As Cendrars writes,

Si dans ces sortes de colonisations on arrive assez facilement à vaincre les difficultés d'ordre matériel qui se présentent chaque jour et à imposer par un travail acharné et une volonté de fer, dûment outillés, un ordre nouveau aux lois séculaires de la nature, au point de transformer pour toujours

l'aspect d'un pays vierge et la climatologie d'une contrée, il n'est pas aussi aisé de maîtriser l'élément humain.

(OC 2: 152)

Political difficulties in Mexico begin to cause problems for Sutter, as does the increasing presence of American hunters, trappers, and fur-traders, all of whom are part of a growing movement for California to join the United States. For a time, Sutter manages to play both sides in a way that keeps his domain protected, negotiating with the Mexicans and providing intelligence reports to the American government. His biggest problem, however, are those groups of Native Americans who are not under his sway, and who plunder his fields, burn his buildings, and kill his people.

Despite these difficulties, New Helvetia thrives. It occupies an immense and well-guarded domain. Its agricultural products are exported widely and sold as provisions to the numerous ships which now begin to drop anchor in the bay. Cendrars paints a vivid picture of this agricultural bounty:

D'innombrables troupeaux passaient dans les grasses prairies, des bêtes de choix. Les vergers regorgeaient de fruits. Dans les potagers, les légumes du vieux monde voisinaient avec ceux des contrées tropicales. Partout des fontaines et des canaux. Les villages canaques étaient propres. Tout le monde était à son travail. Il régnait partout le plus bel ordre. Des allées de magnolias, de palmiers, de bananiers, de camphriers, d'orangers, de citronniers, de poivriers, traversaient les vastes cultures pour converger

vers la ferme. Les murs de l'hacienda disparaissaient sous les bougainvillées, les roses grimpantes, les géraniums charnus. Un rideau de jasmin tombait devant la porte du maître.

(OC 2: 155)

Such a paradisiacal scene suggests a corresponding fall yet to come. Sutter is at the height of his success and prestige, accredited with the largest banks in the United States and Great Britain, a host to Governor Alvarado and General Frémont, a man to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, “il fut souvent sur le point de tout perdre un seul jour,” this despite his “profond connaissance du cœur humain, acquise durant ses années de misère à New York . . .” (OC 2: 156). In fact, the single item which is to lead to Sutter's downfall is already on its way; an innocuous-seeming set of materials with which to build a steam-powered mill, the first of its kind built in America:

On parla durant 25 ans dans les ranches de l'intérieur d'un chariot trainé par 60 couples de bœufs blancs qui traversa sous bonne escorte tout le continent américain dans sa plus grande largeur; après avoir franchi les prairies, les savanes, les rivières, les gués, le défilé des Rocheuses et le désert aux cactus-candélabres géants, il finit par arriver à bon port avec son chargement, se composant de la chaudière et de la machinerie du premier moulin à vapeur construit aux États-Unis. Comme on le verra par la suite, il eût mieux valu pour Johann August Suter, alors au faite de la réussite, de la richesse et de la grandeur, que ce chariot n'arrivât pas, qu'il

coulât à pic au fond d'une rivière, qu'il versât dans un précipice de la montagne ou que ses nombreux attelages de bœufs fussent décimés par une épidémie.

(OC 2: 156)

Sutter may indeed possess a deep knowledge of the human heart, and an uncanny ability to successfully navigate and negotiate human situations, but the introduction of this new technology portends his doom. His empire has been built in traditional fashion, by the sweat of his brow and the manual labor, compelled and otherwise, of many others. It is an agricultural empire, based on the plow, the furrow, the seed, and the bodies of humans and animals alike. Its products have real value, primary value, value that can be held in one's hand and immediately consumed. The bounty of his lands is well-detailed in Cendrars' description of the environs (see above) and of Sutter's table:

La table était splendide. Hors-d'œuvre; truites et saumons des rivières du pays; jambon rôti à l'écossaise; ramiers, cuissot de chevreuil, pattes d'ours; langue fumée; cochon de lait farci à la rissole et saupoudré de farine de tapioca; légumes verts, choux palmistes, gombos en salade; tous les fruits, nature et confits; des montagnes de pâtisserie. Des vins du Rhin et quelques vieilles bouteilles de France qui avaient fait le tour du monde sans s'éventer tellement on en avait pris soin.

(OC 2: 155)

Jay Bochner observes that in this quintessentially Cendrarsian list (when he writes in his maximalist mode, anyway) “some parts of the menus which end *Kodak* [his final book of poetry, published just one year before *L’Or*] even reappear . . . on the table Sutter sets at the height of his success” (DR 149). The wines are imported, but the rest of the comestibles are local (what we would now call “farm to table”). The estate is, for the most part, self-sustaining—cut off from the rest of the world geographically, but with access to trade via the nearby port, and able to sustain itself through its own raw materials and harvests. There is, however, the question of those imported wines (and of Sutter’s antique tableware, “de la vieille argenterie castillane, lourde, plate, frappée aux armes royales”); these items are indicative of a growing affluence that hungers for more and can only be sated with luxury items from outside the domain. For Sutter, these outside luxuries portend disaster, though he does not know it.

At the end of Chapter Six, Sutter enters the happiest and most peaceful period he has known. “Une nouvelle ère commence,” writes Cendrars (OC 2: 157). He experiments with new crops, including olive, apple, and pear trees, cotton, rice, and indigo (these latter three are significant because they were also the first staple crops of the original plantation owners of South Carolina in the late 17th and early 18th centuries—thus Sutter is seen to be in line with conquerors and colonials who had come before him on the North American continent). He builds a grand manor house that he names “The Hermitage.” He dreams of reuniting with his family, whom he had abandoned back in Europe, of repaying and even overpaying his old creditors, and of restoring the honor of his name. “Douce rêverie,” quips Cendrars. The chapter ends in the telegraphic style we’ve grown accustomed to by now:

Rêverie.

Sa pipe s'est éteinte. Ses yeux sont perdus au loin. Les premières étoiles
s'allument. Son chien ne bouge pas.

Rêverie. Calme. Repos.

C'est la paix.

(OC 2: 158)

But this peaceful reverie will be shattered almost immediately. At the verge of his ultimate success, and dreaming of all the things which that success will allow him to do and to be, Sutter is felled by a strange reversal.

Cendrars renders the circumstances of this reversal in Chapter Seven, the shortest in the book. Given here in its entirety, on the page it resembles poetry more than prose:

Rêverie. Calme. Repos.

C'est la paix.

Non. Non. Non. Non. Non. Non. Non. Non. Non: c'est l'OR!

C'est l'or.

Le rush.

La fièvre de l'or qui s'abat sur le monde.

La grande ruée de 1848, 1849, 1850, 1851 et qui durera quinze ans.

SAN FRANCISCO!

(OC 2: 160)

Given that Sutter's reversal was sudden, it's appropriate that Cendrars employs a telegraphic burst to convey the event. Here one can clearly see the influence of Cendrars' prose on that of Dos Passos, whose *U.S.A.* trilogy is full of "newsreel" sections reminiscent of these sections in *L'Or*.

"Et tout cela," writes Cendrars, "est déclenché par un simple coup de pioche" (OC 2: 162). Stamping mobs come first from New York, then from other points along the Atlantic coast, then from the Midwest. They make the arduous journey to California via Panama, where they cross the isthmus on foot. San Francisco becomes a boomtown, with attendant inflation and violence: "Le sucre vaut 5 dollars, le café 10, un œuf 20, un oignon 200, un verre d'eau 1,000. Les coups de feu retentissent et les revolvers, des 45, font office de shériff" (OC 2: 162). The name of Sutter is on everyone's lips, but the name of the workman who actually discovered the gold, John Marshall, is not widely known. Cendrars sums up Sutter's predicament:

Johann August Suter, je ne dirai pas le premier milliardaire américain, mais le premier multimillionnaire des États-Unis, est ruiné par ce coup de pioche.

Il a 45 ans.

Et après avoir tout bravé, tout risqué, tout osé et s'être fait « une vie », il est ruiné par la découverte de mines d'or sur ses terres.

Les plus riches mines du monde.

Les plus grosses pépites.

C'est le filon.

(OC 2: 163)

But whose “filon” is it, whose lode? It isn't a bounty for Sutter, since it brings legions of fortune-hunters to his previously insulated domain. The lode exists, to be sure, but not for him. Cendrars use of the term “le filon” here must surely be ironic.

In Chapter 9, Cendrars employs an imaginative shift in narrative perspective. “Mais laissons la parole à Johann August Suter,” he writes. “Je copie le chapitre suivant dans un gros cahier à couverture en parchemin qui porte des traces de feu.” The author (Cendrars) must decipher the text, since “L'encre a pâli, le papier a jauni, l'orthographe est peu sûre, l'écriture, pleine de paraphes et de queues compliquées, est difficile à déchiffrer, la langue et pleine d'idiotismes, de termes de dialecte bâlois, d'amerenglish” (OC 2: 166). What follows, set off by quotation marks to designate it as being in Sutter's own voice, is a straightforward, factual description of the day on which Marshall tells Sutter of the discovery of gold at the mill. Marshall bursts into the room with important news he insists he can only tell Sutter and only in private. They go to an upstairs room,

and Marshall demands that Sutter securely bolt the door behind them. There, Marshall shows Sutter several grains of yellowish metal. Sutter tests the material in *aqua regia*, then reads the entire article on gold in the *Encyclopaedia Americana*. “Là-dessus,” writes Cendrars, “je déclarai à Marshall que son métal était de l’or, de l’or pur” (OC 2: 167). Though Sutter admits to having some trepidation about the consequences of the find, he does not yet perceive that it will be the ruin of his beloved New Helvetia. He and Marshall travel to the site of the mill, “ce fameux Eldorado.” Sutter explains to the workmen at the mill that it is necessary to keep the discovery of gold a secret for five or six weeks, but writes (though it is Cendrars writing in Sutter’s voice, of course) that “J’étais malheureux et ne savais comment me tirer de cette maudite découverte d’or. J’étais sûr qu’une telle affaire ne pouvait rester secrète” (OC 2: 168-9).

Sutter’s hunch is correct. Less than two weeks later, word has spread. Grains of gold are already circulating as currency. “Alors, mes ouvriers commencèrent à se sauver,” Sutter tells us. “Je restai bientôt tout seul avec quelques mécaniciens fidèles et huit invalides” (OC 2: 169). Even his Mormon employees, previously loyal to a fault, succumb to gold fever and flee. Sutter’s mills stop running. His tanneries are abandoned and the unprocessed hides rot. His miseries commence: “Mes bergers abandonnèrent les troupeaux, mes planteurs, les plantations, les ouvriers, leur ouvrage. Mes blés pourrissaient sur pied; personne pour faire la cueillette dans mes vergers; dans mes étables, mes plus belles vaches laitières beuglaient à la mort” (OC 2: 169). While hordes travel to Fort Sutter and beyond to Coloma, Sutter finds himself virtually alone. He makes an attempt to follow the pack, attempting to set up his own, well-provisioned prospecting camp, but rough-neck profiteers ply his men with liquor and false promises

and peel them away. Sutter moves his camp higher and higher into the mountains, but there is no peace to be had. He finds himself on a summit, alone:

Du sommet de ces montagnes, je voyais tout l'immense pays que j'avais fertilisé, livré au pillage et aux incendies. Des coups de feu montaient jusque dans ma solitude et le brouhaha des foules en marche qui venaient de l'ouest. Au fond de la baie, je voyais s'édifier une ville inconnue qui grandissaient à vue d'œil et au large, la mer était pleine de vaisseaux.

Je n'y pus plus tenir.

Je redescendis au fort. Je licenciâmes tous ceux qui s'étaient sauvés et qui ne voulaient pas m'accompagner. Je résiliai tous les contrats. Je réglai tous les comptes.

J'étais ruiné.

(OC 2: 170)

Sutter then says that had he been able to follow his plans through to their conclusion, he would have become the richest man in the world. On this point, however, I think that Sutter is a less-than-reliable narrator. Mere money is not his ultimate desire; instead, it seems that what he seeks throughout *L'Or* is wealth, defined as power fueled by riches. He wants to redeem his family name and restore the family he abandoned in the Old

Country. But the mere accumulation of money isn't enough. What's taken from him by the gold rush is harder to replace. On the question of the difference between money and wealth, I turn to the sinister character Varga, from the third season of the television series " Fargo." Speaking to Emmet Stussy, the rich founder of a Minnesota company that owns parking lots and garages, Varga says:

There's an accounting coming, Mr. Stussy, and you know I'm right. Mongrel hordes descending, and what are you doing to insulate yourself and your family? You think you're rich. You've no idea what rich means. Rich is a fleet of private planes filled with decoys to mask your scent. It's a bunker in Wyoming and another in Gstaad. So that's action item one, the accumulation of wealth. And I mean wealth, not money.²

As the ensuing chapters demonstrate, Sutter's ability to earn money continues unabated despite the "mongrel hordes descending," but because of the loss of his lands, his political capital, and his social status, he considers himself ruined nonetheless.

In section 32, which begins chapter 10, Cendrars cites other sources, including a report by General Mason, the new American Governor, and *The Polynesian*, a newspaper out of Honolulu. The Mason report is real, and is available online at the website of the

² <http://fargoquotes.blogspot.com/2017/05/vm-varga-theres-accounting-coming-mr.html>

San Francisco museum³, but Cendrars has translated it into French fairly loosely. The general thrust of the report, however, is clear:

Le 3 juillet . . . nous arrivons à Fort Suter. Les moulins sont silencieux. D'immenses troupeaux de bœufs et de chevaux ont démoli leurs clôtures et paissent tranquillement dans les champs de blé et de maïs. Les fermes tombent en ruines, il s'en dégage une odeur nauséabonde.

(OC 2: 172)

The report from *The Polynesian* is in the form of a letter from a correspondent in California who has traveled from San Francisco to the gold fields, passing through Fort Sutter along the way. The letter describes the area around the fort as “un pays d'une fertilité étonnante et qui pourrait nourrir une population immense. Mais nous ne rencontrâmes pas un seul être humain. Toutes les fermes étaient abandonnées: les Américains, les Californiens, les Indiens, tout le monde était aux mines” (OC 2: 173). The prodigious and bountiful agricultural tracts are empty and fallow, while at the sawmill itself, a thousand men are crammed in, panning for gold.

The human deluge continues. Gold-seekers from New York and Boston head west, followed shortly by fortune hunters from England, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Holland. The traffic through the Isthmus of Panama is so thick that a town springs up, Aspinwall, a waystation along the route. Once in California, “Des agglomérations naissaient et se multipliaient avec une rapidité sans exemple dans l'histoire” (OC 2: 175).

³ www.sfmuseum.net/hist6/masonrpt.html

Within seven years, the region, which previously had a population in the thousands, numbers its inhabitants in the millions. San Francisco becomes one of the largest and most important capitals in the world. As for Sutter? “Et cependant, Johann August Suter est ruiné” (OC 2: 175). The name “New Helvetia” disappears, replaced by a multitude of new place names, including Sutterville, Sutter’s Creek, and Sutter’s County.

Had Sutter been a cold-blooded capitalist, the gold rush would have presented an unprecedented opportunity. Miners need food and provisions, and Sutter is in a perfect position to exploit these needs for profit. And yet, as Cendrars tells us, “Suter n’a plus le cœur à l’ouvrage. Il laisse tout tomber” (OC 2: 176). Other men will make their fortunes, speculating and trading, but Sutter sees no purpose in such activities: “Il ne fait rien. Il ne fait rien” (OC 2: 176). To make matters worse, lawyers begin to arrive, seizing and partitioning his lands and drawing up new titles and deeds. Sutter, who previously made his own law, is now subject to a complicated system of laws greater than himself. In September 1850, California officially becomes part of the United States, but the chaos there cannot be put to order overnight. A long, slow, grinding process of legislation and litigation begins: “Alors commence une série de procès prodigieux, coûteux, inutiles. La Loi. La Loi impuissante. Les hommes de loi que Johann August Suter méprise” (OC 2: 177). Sutter will have good reason to despise the law, as the rest of *L’Or* will demonstrate.

In Chapter 11, the scene shifts back to Basle, where Frau Sutter is making arrangements to travel to California to reunite with her husband. In late 1847, she had received a letter summoning her to New Helvetia, complete with financial and travel plans set out in detail. In Basle, she is assisted by Martin Birmann, tutor to her children

(and whose 1868 monograph about Sutter was one of Cendrars' primary sources for *L'Or*). Birman and others have urged Frau Sutter to reconcile with the husband who abandoned her and their children, for the sake of Christian charity and for the honor of her children. A key factor in her decision to travel is her knowledge that "son mari . . . est un homme honorablement connu et accrédité dans les plus grandes banques d'Europe, qu'il est un des plus gros colons d'Amérique" (OC 2: 180). Letters-of-credit from major banking houses are delivered to her, and her journey gets underway.

One of these letters-of-credit is drawn on the banking house of Pury, Pury, et Fils in Le Havre. Though no Cendrars scholars have ever noted the significance of this passing reference, I believe that here Cendrars is making a sly nod to another ill-fated Swiss colonist and explorer, Jean-Pierre Purry (1675-1736). Purry was from Neuchâtel, as was Cendrars, and it seems likely that Cendrars would have been familiar with his story. In the late 1720s, Purry began to hatch a scheme of settlement in the English colony of Carolina. He solicited various lords and government officials, and finally drew backing to establish a township on the banks of the Savannah River, upriver from present-day Savannah, Georgia. He founded Purrysburg in 1734, with the idea of planting mulberry trees, importing silkworms, and producing raw silk for export to European markets. He advertised widely in Switzerland and France, and convinced several hundred Swiss and French Protestants to join him in Carolina. His descriptions of the terrain and climate were highly misleading, and the settlers, many of whom were of Alpine stock, suffered and died in droves in the hot, swampy, pestilential settlement. Purry himself died in 1736, and the colony dwindled over the course of several decades. Purry's reputation ended up being that of a charlatan and a failure, "a maligned and shadowy figure

shrouded with contempt if not a little mystery” (Migliazzo 232). However, much like Sutter, “Such distortion tarnishes the real legacy Purry left in his wake. His great crime proceeded solely from his singleminded and admittedly rather naïve desire to colonize the New World and, in doing so, to transplant a European feudal community to virgin soil” (Migliazzo 232). According to Migliazzo, Purry was neither saint nor villain, but instead was an ambitious man of his time who aspired above all to the status of a “medieval landed gentleman.” Given Blaise Cendrars’ propensity for historical and archival research and his origin in Neuchâtel, I believe that the inclusion of Pury, Pury et Fils in Chapter 11 of *L’Or* is not without significance.

Frau Sutter and her children cross the Atlantic and debark at Aspinwall, Panama, where the flags of nine different nations fly. In Panama, they hear fantastic stories about the great Sutter: “C’est un roi; c’est un empereur. Il est monté sur un cheval blanc. La selle est d’or, le mors est d’or, et les étriers et les éperons aussi, même les fers de son cheval” (OC 2: 183). In Panama, “Le soleil est comme une pêche fondante” (OC 2: 184). They go on to San Francisco, and when they arrive after a frightful journey (during which the ship’s captain severs the thumb of one of the crewmembers and uses it to tamp down his pipe), “elle apprend que la Nouvelle-Helvétie n’existe plus et que Suter a disparu” (OC 2: 184). They are guided through the unfamiliar country of northern California by Sutter’s blacksmith, Jean Marchais, who begs them to deliver Sutter a message when they see him:

Dites-lui que j’ai bien l’œil à tout et que je rattrape tout ce que je puis rattraper. Il y a encore beaucoup d’argent à faire par ici, mais, grand Dieu,

qu'il me dise ce que je dois faire. Je suis tout seul. Dites au Maître qu'il ne ferait pas mal de faire un tour par ici.

(OC 2: 185)

Jean Marchais reminds us yet again that despite the influx of gold-seekers, and even because of it, there is money to be made; yet Sutter is absent, his dream of empire violated and reduced to nothing.

Frau Sutter dies as soon as the party arrives at The Hermitage, and does not deliver Marchais' message. Sutter is there, and appears to them as an old man shuffling out of the silent mansion. The children—sons Emile, Arthur, and Victor and daughter Mina—take up residence with their father.

Father Gabriel, who runs a nearby mission for the Indians, counsels Sutter to take advantage of “une vie nouvelle s'établit dans la contrée” (OC 2: 188). He advises him to set an example, not only for his children, but also for the legions of dissolute fortune-seekers continuing to pour into the area. “Courage, vieux pionnier,” he tells Sutter. “Ce pays est ta véritable patrie. Recommence” (OC 2: 188).

But try as he might—and he does try, building farms for his eldest sons, sending his youngest son to study law back East, deeding The Hermitage to his daughter and transforming it into a Temperance Center for Native Americans—Sutter cannot truly comport himself to the new realities: “Johann August Suter ne peut oublier le coup qui l'a frappé. Il est en proie à une sombre terreur. Il s'éloigne de plus en plus des travaux de la ferme et cette nouvelle mise en train n'absorbe plus comme autrefois toutes ses facultés” (OC 2: 189). He begins to study the Book of Revelation. He becomes withdrawn,

distrustful, and above all, afraid. “Lui, l’homme d’action par excellence, lui qui n’a jamais hésité, hésite maintenant” (OC 2: 189). He is overwhelmed by the proliferation of fortune-seekers and land-grabbers. “Et maintenant, après s’être assassinés entre eux,” Sutter thinks, his head spinning, “ils fondent des familles, des familles, des villages, des villes et s’organisent sur mes terres, à l’abri de la Loi . . . Toutes ces villes, toutes ces villes m’appartiennent après tout, et les villages, les familles, et les gens, leur travail, leurs bestiaux, leur Bonheur, Mon Dieu, que faire?” (OC 2: 189-90). His megalomania spins out of control, and the more tightly he tries to hold onto what he perceives as rightfully his, the looser his grip on those possessions, real and imagined, becomes. Everything slips from his grasp, and slips more quickly the more he clenches his fist.

Then he is seized by a vision, “un étrange retour sur lui-même . . . Il est victime d’un mirage.” He sees his mother, his father, his childhood, and the church in which he was raised, “à ce milieu d’honneur et de travail.” He feels ashamed. The vision expands, and he sees his homeland, “ce coin paisible de la vieille Europe où tout est calme, réglé, à sa place. Tout y bien ordonné, les ponts, les canaux, les routes. Les maisons sont debout depuis toujours. La vie des habitants est sans histoire: on y travaille, on y est heureux” (OC 2: 190). His vision of Rünenberg stands in stark contrast to the raw, wild, ungoverned reality of California.

Section 46 consists entirely of a letter ostensibly written from Sutter to Herr Birmann in Switzerland. No evidence that such a letter really exists is offered, and it is to be assumed that Cendrars in fact authors the letter in the voice of Sutter. In it, Sutter summarizes his rise and fall, saying that at his height “Je vivais dans ce pays comme un prince ou plutôt, comme dit un proverbe de chez nous, je vivais dans ce beau pays de

Californie « comme Dieu en France ».” But God’s ways are devious and mysterious, according to Sutter, and his downfall begins with Marshall’s “coup de pioche” (OC 2: 190). He tells Birmann that “l’or est maudit, et tous ceux qui viennent ici, et tous ceux qui le ramassent sont maudits, car le plupart d’entre eux disparaissent, je me demande comment?” He laments the fact that even troops ordered to California by the federal government cannot keep the peace, and that even those soldiers desert and flee into the hills, stricken as they are with gold fever. “La bête de l’Apocalypse erre maintenant dans la contrée et tout le monde est plein d’agitation,” he writes (OC 2: 191). Everyone is filing lawsuits, both against Sutter and against one another. Sutter considers retaliatory lawsuits, but worries that asserting what he sees as his rights will necessitate thousands of such suits. He tells Birmann that he has sent his oldest son, Emile, off to study law, in hopes that the boy might prepare himself for future legal battles. He asks Birmann’s advice as to whether he should pursue his claims or simply abdicate and return to “notre petit canton de Bâle” (OC 2: 193). He worries that chasing after the wealth that has been taken from him will corrupt him just as the feverish pursuit of gold has corrupted others: “L’or porte malheur; si j’y touche, si je le poursuis, si je revendique ce qui m’en revient de plein droit, est-ce que je ne vais pas être maudit à mon tour, comme tant d’autres et selon les exemples que j’ai sous les yeux et dont je vous ai déjà parlé?” (OC 2: 193). Despite his seemingly sincere plea for Birmann’s assistance and advice, Sutter does not wait for a reply. He commences a lawsuit claiming sole ownership of lands worth 200 million dollars and naming over 17,000 individual defendants.

Sutter’s lawsuit is revolutionary in its scope and impact. Parties line up on each side of the question, with the new state of California and the municipalities within it

marshaling their legal forces to defend themselves. This buzz of legal activity brings a new sort of plague upon the land—a sort of lawyerly gold rush:

Avoués, notaires, huissiers, commis, stagiaires, scribouillards se ruent en Californie où ils s’abattent pêle-mêle avec les chercheurs d’or internationaux dont l’afflux n’est point terminé. C’est un nouveau rush, une mine inespérée, et tout ce monde veut vivre de l’affaire Suter.

(OC 2: 195)

Emile Sutter devotes himself entirely to “cette monstrueuse affaire,” but Johann August Sutter leaves the details of the fight to his lawyers, preferring to stay on what’s left of his property and make money with which to feed his lawsuit by provisioning miners and sailors and merchants.

Four years go by. The lawsuit drags on. The costs are astronomical. Sutter’s agricultural and light manufacturing enterprises are prosperous. In order to keep the funds flowing, Sutter squeezes his customers harder and harder, raising prices and restricting supply as it suits him. He becomes widely loathed, but does not seem to care. He begins to correspond with religious sects back East, and mounts a temperance movement among the miners. He carries a copy of the Book of Revelation in his pocket. If any gold-diggers happen to come onto his property, he has them beaten mercilessly.

These tensions come to a head when, toward the end of the lawsuit’s fourth year, anti-Sutter riots break out in San Francisco and in the surrounding areas. Emile’s offices are burned down. The key documents relating to the case are destroyed, including the

original titles to the land granted to Sutter by the Mexican government. Then, two years later, public opinion seems to have reversed itself. Once the lawsuit is moribund, Sutter is no longer a threat, and during the 1854 celebrations commemorating the fourth anniversary of California's entry into the United States, he is hailed as "l'Ancêtre" and awarded the honorary title of "General."

He is paraded through the streets, dressed in a somewhat ridiculous fashion. The "celebration" borders on mockery. The populace at turns hails him and lampoons him. Sutter himself hardly recognizes where he is or what is going on:

Le général Johann August Suter traverse la ville en proie à une étrange émotion. Ces ovations, ces vivats, ces gerbes de fleurs qui tombent sous ses pas, ces cloches, ces chants, ce canon, ces fanfares, cette multitude, ces fenêtres pleines de femmes, ces maisons, ces édifices, ces premiers palais, ces rues interminables, tout lui paraît irréel. Il n'y a pas six ans qu'il vivait encore ici au milieu des sauvages, entouré de ses Indiens et de ses Canaques des îles.

(OC 2: 201)

Sutter allows himself to be carried along, and is practically insensate. His mental deterioration is, from this point until the end of the novel, increasingly apparent. He no longer wishes to see or hear.

On the 15th of March 1855, Judge Thompson, the highest-ranking magistrate in California, issues his decision in the Sutter case. The text of the decision runs to over two

hundred pages. Thompson decides the case in Sutter's favor, acknowledging that all of the territories formerly occupied by the Sutter enterprise, including the sites of San Francisco, Sacramento, and numerous smaller towns, inviolably belong to Sutter. When Jean Marchais, one of his last loyal servants, delivers the good news, he finds Sutter engrossed in a booklet on the breeding of silkworms, which may be another sly reference by Cendrars to the ill-fated Carolina silk colony of his and Sutter's fellow Swiss, Jean-Pierre Purry (see pages 153-4 above). Sutter knows that the verdict must be delivered to a Federal Court in Washington, D.C., and quickly decides, out of childish vanity, to hurry across the country and hand-deliver Thompson's verdict to the court himself. He leaves everything behind him. Two days out on the road, looking back in the direction from which he had come, he sees a great orange light in the sky. He knows that his home, The Hermitage, is burning. He hurries back.

Once again, public opinion has turned against him. Judge Thompson's verdict, because it means the potential ruin of thousands, has incited a mob: "Le populace veut lyncher le juge Thompson . . . tout le pays est en révolution . . . les autorités sont impuissantes" (OC 2: 208-9). Ten thousand men descend upon The Hermitage, flying the American flag before them, pillaging and razing and sacking everything in their path:

L'Ermitage est incendié, on fait sauter les manufactures, les usines, les scieries, les ateliers, les moulins, on coupe les arbres fruitiers, on perfore les canalisations d'eau, les troupeaux sont massacrés à coups de fusils et les Indiens, les Canaques, les Chinois que l'on peut attraper sont pendus haut et court. Tout ce qui porte l'estampille, la marque de Suter disparaît.

On met le feu aux plantations, on ravage les vignobles. Enfin, on s'attaque aux caves et aux réserves de vins. Et la fureur destructrice de cette foule devient enragée, elle tue, elle casse, elle brûle, elle pille, et son acharnement est tel qu'elle abat jusqu'aux volailles par feux de salves commandés. Puis l'on monte à Burgdorf et à Grenzach, où tout est également nivelé, abrasé, réduit en cendres. On scie les écluses, on défonce les routes, on fait sauter les ponts.

Ruines et cendres.

Quatre jours après son départ, quand Suter revient chez lui, il ne subsiste plus rien de son immense entreprise.

Des maigres fumées montent encore des décombres. Des nuées d'urubus, de vautours, de corbeaux à bec rouge se disputent les charognes des chevaux et des bestiaux éparses dans les champs.

A la maîtresse branche d'un figuier sauvage se balance la carcasse de Jean Marchais.

Cette fois-ci tout est perdu.

Pour toujours.

(OC 2: 209)

Sutter is left with nothing but the clothes on his back, a small supply of traveling provisions, and his copy of the Book of Revelation. He wanders through the district, where he is mocked and sneered at. Children throw stones at him. He is like a child himself, reduced to a state of second infancy. Months later, he wanders into San Francisco:

Il pénètre en ville sans que personne le reconnaisse. Lui a peur des grandes maisons qui jaillissent de partout, des rues qui s'entrecroisent, des véhicules rapides, des gens affairés qui le bousculent. Il a surtout horreur de la face humaine et il craint de lever les yeux.

(OC 2: 210)

He sleeps in the port and begs in the streets. He spends many hours squatting in the vacant lot which not long before had been occupied by his son's law office. He visits Judge Thompson to seek news of his children. The news is not good. Mina, his daughter, has taken refuge with Thompson, but has suffered a nervous breakdown and will not speak or leave her bed. His son Victor has left for Europe, and Arthur was killed while defending his farm against the mob. The eldest, Emile, the lawyer who was supposed to

manage the monstrous case for his father, has committed suicide in a hovel. Sutter is now mostly deaf, and makes Thompson repeat the tragic tale twice. His response? “Que Ta volonté soit faite. Ainsi soit-il” (OC 2: 211).

In the sixteenth and concluding chapter of *L'Or*, Cendrars fast-forwards to the 1870s. Sutter is in Washington, D.C., where he has been for years. He has become a familiar figure around the capitol, with his “grand corps mou, ses pieds qui se traînent dans les bottes éculées, sa redingote tachée et saupoudrée de pellicules, sa grosse tête chauve qui branle sous son grand feutre défoncé” (OC 2: 220). The government offices pass him along from one to the next; he knocks on endless doors and receives lukewarm assurances that his case will be handled. He knows all the nooks and crannies of the government’s bureaucracy, but he is “pris comme dans une souricière” (OC 2: 220). He no longer cares about gold, money, or lands; instead he wants justice, an enforceable verdict. He barely supports himself with menial jobs: “il cire les bottes, fait des courses et des commissions, lave la vaisselle dans une gargote de soldats où son titre de général et son horreur du whisky l’ont rendu populaire” (OC 2: 221). He is hoodwinked by one fortune-seeker after another, each of whom claims to have the ability to lobby Congress on his behalf. In 1873, he joins the Herrenhütter, a religious sect based in Pennsylvania, and signs a statement indicating that he will donate all of his eventual fortune and all of his California possessions to the group “afin que dans ces belles vallées la souillure de l’or soit efface par la pureté adamiste” (OC 2: 222). He moves from Washington to Lititz, Pennsylvania, where he is “baptisé et purifié selon le grand rituel babylonien. C’est maintenant une âme toute blanche qui vit dans l’intimité du Seigneur” (OC 2: 222). He lives among the Herrenhütters, and becomes famous in the small community because of

his deep knowledge of the Book of Revelation which, as it turns out, is the cult's only sacred text.

Section 69 shows Sutter giving ecstatic, hallucinatory testimony to the assembled brothers and sisters of the cult. He comments on the apocalyptic vision of St. John and melds them with incidents from his own life:

La Grande Prostituée qui a accouché sur la Mer, c'est Christophe Colomb découvrant l'Amérique.

Les Anges et les Étoiles de saint Jean sont dans le drapeau américain, et avec la Californie, une nouvelle étoile, l'Étoile d'Absinthe, est venue s'inscrire dans la bannière étoilée.

L'Ante-Christ, c'est l'or.

Les Bêtes et les Satans sont les Indiens anthropophages, les Caraïbes et les Canaques. Il y a aussi les Nègres et les Chinois, les noirs et les jaunes.

Les Trois Cavaliers sont les trois grandes tribus Peaux-Rouges.

Déjà un tiers des peuples d'Europe a été décimé dans ce pays.

Je suis un des vingt-quatre Vieillards, et c'est parce que j'ai entendu la Voix que je suis descendu parmi vous. J'étais l'homme le plus riche du monde, l'or m'a ruiné . . .

(OC 2: 222-3)

Sutter is by now completely delusional, imagining himself a prophet. He reads Revelation through the lens of American history, and conflates the symbolism of that final book of the New Testament with actual events from American history, and from his own history as well. But even in this compromised state, Sutter cannot be left alone. The leader of the *Herrenhütters*, Johannes Christich, opens Sutter's case again and tries to push it forward, hoping for an eventual bounty for the cult. He travels to Washington frequently, lobbying and haranguing lawyers and government officials, always bringing Sutter with him as a sort of prop. He even unearths Sutter's old general's uniform, which was always more of a costume than uniform, and dresses him up in it, even bedecking his chest with meaningless medals and ribbons. "Et le martyr du Général recommence de bureau en bureau," Cendrars writes, "de ministère en ministère . . . tous les gamins de Washington connaissent la folie du Général et s'amuse énormément" (OC 2: 223). He is but an old madman, exploited at every turn, a joke even among the street urchins.

In 1880, Sutter escapes Christich's clutches once and for all. He is agitated and feverish, and wanders the Washington streets day and night. He awaits a Congressional verdict that will never come. He is surrounded by an entourage of ragamuffins who refuse to leave his side. In his mind, these street kids are "l'armée des Justes." One day, he sees three hospital attendants dragging a filthy, raving man through the street. The

man breaks free for a moment and rolls on the ground, stuffing his mouth and his pockets with pebbles and dirt. Sutter recognizes him. It is John Marshall, whose discovery of gold on Sutter's land more than thirty years before had started the gold rush and begun their ruin. Marshall recognizes Sutter too, and as he is being dragged away, he cries out:

“Patron, patron, je vous l'avais bien dit, il y a de l'or partout, tout est en or!” (OC 2: 225).

Not long after, on a hot June afternoon, Sutter sits on the bottom step of the Capitol building. A street urchin runs up to him excitedly and tells him “Général! Tu as gagné! Le Congrès vient de se prononcer! Il te donne cent millions de dollars!” The urchin tells him that it's already in all of the newspapers, and that he and his friends are going to sell a bundle of them. Sutter does not notice the cluster of guttersnipes off to the side, who are laughing and pointing and signaling their friend whom they have dared to tease him. Sutter stands,

puis il battu l'air des bras et est tombé tout d'une pièce. Le général Johann August Suter est mort le 17 juin 1880, à trois heures de l'après-midi. Le Congrès n'avait même pas siégé ce jour-là.

Les gamins se sont sauvés.

L'heure sonne dans l'immense place déserte et comme le soleil tourne, l'ombre gigantesque du Palais du Congrès recouvre bientôt le cadavre du Général.

(OC 2: 225)

Sutter dies on the street, the enormous shadow of the United States Capitol building shrouding his fallen body. His case grinds on, by now having taken on a life of its own, separate from the lives of its principals, much like the protracted case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.

The closing chapter of *L'Or*, chapter 17, consisting of only one section (section 74), is, along with section 27, the shortest in the book. In its entirety, it reads:

Johann August Suter est mort à 73 ans.

Le Congrès ne s'est jamais prononcé.

Ses descendants ne sont jamais intervenus, ont abandonné l'Affaire.

Sa succession reste ouverte.

Aujourd'hui, 1925, et pour quelques années seulement, on peut encore intervenir, agir, revendiquer.

Qui veut de l'or? qui veut de l'or?

Paris, 1910-1922.

Paris, 1910-1911.

Paris, 1914.

Paris, 1917.

Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre,

du 22 novembre 1924 au 31 décembre 1924

(OC 2: 228)

In Cendrars' closing section, two things are noteworthy. First, there is the repeated question "Qui veut de l'or? qui veut de l'or?" with its orthographic idiosyncrasy, his failure to capitalize the beginning of the second question. The repetition recalls the last line of "Les Pâques à New-York" ("Je ne pense plus à Vous. Je ne pense plus à Vous."), in which the speaker of the poem seems to be trying so hard not to think about Christ that he in fact can only think of Him. In *L'Or*, the repetition has a different effect, especially since the second instance of the question is subordinated and diminished because of its lower-case "q". The expected answer to the first question, "Qui veut de l'or?" would seem to be "everyone, of course!", but the answer to the second, echoed question might well be more hesitant, especially since the question is posed at the very end of a novel about a man ruined by gold. The second thing to note about the conclusion of *L'Or* is the string of dates and place names with which Cendrars signs off. He does something similar at the end of "Panama," where he offers a long string of place names, all of which are areas in the vicinity of Paris. At the end of "Panama," however, the dates are straightforward— "Juin 1913-Juin 1914." The dates at the end of *L'Or* are more complicated, indicating that the research and composition that went into Cendrars' first novel took place in fits and starts and over a long period of time. Though he finally hammered out the novel in a five-week-long burst of writing at his house at Le Tremblay-

sur-Mauldre at the end of 1924, the book had been in gestation since 1910, which is when he first heard the Sutter story from his friend August Suter, the grandson of Johann August Suter.

L'Or quickly became a worldwide success, and by the 1930s the novel had been translated into many languages, including German, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Russian, Swedish, Flemish, Spanish, Serbian, and even Braille. The Russian edition, which was translated by Victor Serge, Cendrars' anarchist friend from before the First World War, was published in 1929 under the title *Zoloto*. In the notes to his long prose work *Le Lotissement du ciel* (1949), Cendrars writes that Serge's translation of *L'Or* into Russian and the publication of the novel in the Soviet Union by Leningrad's L'Éditions d'État were done without his knowledge. Curiously, *Zoloto* became one of Josef Stalin's favorite novels, and inspired him to launch gold mining efforts in the Urals. Writing in the Saturday Evening Post of November 30, 1946, Soviet defector Victor Kravchenko related the following concerning Stalin's interest in Cendrars' novel:

One day in 1932, I was visiting Sergo Ordzhonikidze when Serebrovski, the chief of the Central Administration of Gold Mines, called at his office. In the course of their conversation, Ordzhonikidze thanked Serebrovski for the book he had given him and which he, in turn, had passed on to Stalin. When Serebrovski had gone, I asked Ordzhonikidze about the book. He told me it was by Blaise Cendrars, its title was *Sutter's Gold*.

Ordzhonikidze had given the book to Stalin, he said, because of the boss' interest in the references to gold mining in the works of Jack London.

(cited in OC 6: 598-9)

Another source that documents Stalin's interest in *L'Or* is the book *In Search of Soviet Gold* by John D. Littlepage, published by Harcourt, Brace and Company in 1937.

Littlepage was an American engineer who specialized in gold mining. In 1927, while he was working at gold mines in Alaska, he was visited by Soviet mining commissar Alexander Serebrovski (nicknamed "the Soviet Rockefeller"), who is mentioned in Kravchenko's quote above. Serebrovski was on a mission to bring Littlepage and other American engineers to the Soviet Union in order to modernize Soviet mining techniques. In 1928, Littlepage and his family moved to the Soviet Union, where he remained until 1937. Of Stalin's interest in Cendrars, Littlepage writes:

At this point, in the summer of 1927, Joseph Stalin comes into the picture. It seems he wasn't so much disposed as some of the other Communists to accept as eternal truth the pronouncements of Karl Marx and Lenin about gold. In some way, not publically explained, he became interested in the subject of the 1849 gold rush in California, and began to read every book he could get on the subject. Among others, he read *Sutter's Gold*, written a year or so previously by a French writer named Blaise Cendrars, a book which draws a vivid picture of the gold rush . . . the Far Eastern territory of Russia was so sparsely settled at the time that it would be very difficult

to defend; it provided inadequate communications and supplies for an army of any size. It was natural that Stalin should turn over in his mind various means to make this territory more secure. And the California gold rush gave him a clue . . . Stalin's imagination was fired by reading about the California of 1849. He was fascinated to observe how rapidly the western regions of the United States had been filled up after gold was discovered in California, and saw that the process had been largely accomplished by the incentive of getting rich quick.

(26-7)

In his notes to *Le Lotissement du ciel*, Cendrars observes that the center for Soviet gold mining in the Russian Far East was Kolyma and that the name of the place where Sutter's man John Marshall first discovered gold in California in 1848 is Coloma. Between 1932 and 1954, Kolyma was also the site of 80 or more gulags, many of which were begun as forced-labor mining camps and only later turned into political prisons. The Kolyma Highway, a road which was built by slave labor, was commonly known as The Road of Bones.⁴ Estimates of the number of people who died or were killed in the Kolyma region vary widely, with some counts as high as 500,000. Cendrars' conclusion?

⁴ Wikipedia contributors. "Kolyma." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 7 Oct. 2017. Web.

L'or est maudit . . . La politique et ses mobiles, le nom des héros, des conquérants et des victimes, les cultures, les civilisations, tout s'effondre, s'efface, les monuments se tassent, les patries et les peuples sont oubliés, seule dure la Poésie comme le souvenir intermittent et quasi inconscient d'un rêve d'enfance: la définition de l'humanité, l'homme RÉEL.

(OC 6: 599)

The first English translation of *L'Or*, by Henry Longan Stuart, with woodcut illustrations by Harry Cimino, was published by Harper & Brothers in 1926. One of the earliest reviews in the United States, published in *America* magazine's October 9, 1926 issue, is indicative of the reception the book would initially receive in the country in which it is set. Signed by one "W.F.C.," it reads, in part:

With plentiful embellishments suggested by an excellent imagination, the Frenchman, Blaise Cendrars, himself something of a vagabond, has dramatically and colorfully depicted the Swiss-American's spectacular career, and Henry Longan Stuart has translated his volume into very choice English. It is a good fairy tale for adults. As an historical narrative, however, it will scarcely warrant critical review. Notable inaccuracies will be readily recognized by readers familiar with Bancroft, Hittell and later California historians, though its basic facts are substantially correct. The attractiveness of the book is greatly enhanced by the artistic workmanship

of Harry Cimino who decorates its pages through his favorite medium, wood-blocks.

(621)

The novel's subtitle ("La Merveilleuse Histoire du Général Johann August Suter") was omitted from Stuart's translation; its inclusion might have given the book away as being something other than a straightforward historical novel. Many American readers were baffled and even angered by *Sutter's Gold* when it was first appeared in the United States. Joseph Henry Jackson, reviewing the book in the December 1926 issue of *Sunset* magazine, wrote that although it was "a dramatic and forceful thing, it had nothing much to do with history" (Berglund 143). In the June 1927 edition of the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, it was reported that at a meeting of the society a certain Dr. DuFour had "prefaced his remarks with some comments on *Sutter's Gold*, by Blaise Cendrars, which he regarded as a readable story but of no value as a history of Sutter's life or representation of his aims and ambitions" (198). Yet earlier that same year, in the January 1927 issue of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, the same DuFour had written that "It may be that in *Sutter's Gold* Blaise Cendrars never intended to write a genuinely historical tale. If he only desired to supply his readers with a sort of literary rhapsody it would be manifestly unfair to ascribe to him a motive to which he laid no claim" (233). In this instance DuFour came closer to the mark. In June 1928, the California Historical Society was still discussing Cendrars' book; at their monthly luncheon meeting Mr. Carl I. Wheat assailed Cendrars' "ignorance of the geography of the country" and attacked what he perceived as his "fancies" regarding the details of Sutter's life (Blake 289). In

1930 Erwin Gudde, writing on behalf of the same historical society, attacked the “inexcusable perversions of historical facts” with which he felt *Sutter’s Gold* was rife. Gudde went on to assert that “Mr. Cendrars is blissfully ignorant of the history and geography of California and that cheap sensationalism was his leading motive in writing the book” (398). Despite these misapprehensions of what Cendrars was up to, *Sutter’s Gold* made an impression, not only on the literary world, but in terms of the historical Sutter’s reputation as well. John A. Hawgood, writing in the magazine *Arizona and the West* in 1962, notes that “The eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910) does not even give Sutter a separate entry,” but that “in the fourteenth edition of the Britannica (1929) Sutter is noticed to the extent of half a column - just a few lines more than John Philip Sousa. This, Hawgood says, “was probably due more than anything else to the sensation that had been caused in the publishing world by a best-selling book called *Sutter’s Gold*” (347).

Reviewers in France were far more kind than those in America who expected a straightforward history of Sutter and the gold rush. Joseph Delteil wrote that “Cendrars l’écrit avec sécheresse, une froideur incroyables. C’est le style des bilans. Non, plus rien, absolument rien du vieux Cendrars, du Cendrars des *Poèmes élastiques*. Plus une image, plus une belle alliance des mots. Mais des chiffres, des faits. Le journal de bord d’un homme d’action” (944). John Charpentier, writing in the *Mercure de France* on July 15, 1925, said of *L’Or*: “Il est sec ou schématique à souhait, et l’on sent toujours dans son style le muscle, sinon l’os même, sous la chair” (452). Jay Bochner, in *Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Re-creation*, rightly observes that the bare and muscular style of *L’Or* has no true precedent or follow-up in Cendrars’ body of work (149). His other novels of the

1920s, *Moravagine* (1926), *Le Plan de l'Aiguille*, and *Les Confessions de Dan Yack* (both 1929) are lush in comparison, and his great tetralogy of the post-World War II years (*L'Homme foudroyé*, *La Main coupée*, *Bourlinguer*, and *Le Lotissement du ciel*, all published between 1945 and 1949), are absolutely maximalist in style and scope.

Bochner sees the essential conflict in *L'Or* as Sutter's "peasant instinct to build and society's cupidity." For Bochner, Sutter is essentially constructive, though his instincts can (and do) bring harm to others; this constructive instinct "sweeps aside moral considerations, but then again it builds civilizations" (152). He continues:

Sutter is the personification of such an instinct outside of good and evil, a representative man in the deep sense which Carlyle and Emerson may have intuited when they wrote of the hero in society; but he is also singly human, and just as he always carries the book of the *Apocalypse* with him on his odyssey, he also carries within himself a defeat as sure as his instinct. Gold is the oracle's prediction. The failure of the gold seekers to prefer Sutter's way, husbandry, to the quicker but spiritually as well as socially destructive way of gold draws a dark picture of society as a whole which in part vindicates Sutter, who had made, when we put them in the balance, infinitely less serious moral errors.

(DR 152-3)

Sutter builds, but the gold seekers only take. Sutter produces that which is renewable, but what the forty-niners take can never be replaced. His agricultural pursuits are rooted in

bounty, whereas gold thrives on scarcity. As Emil Szittyá wrote, the entire novel is “contre l’or, pour le blé” (Bochner 151). Sutter remains ignorant of politics and law from the novel’s beginning until its end, and this ignorance, at least in part, makes him their victim. Likewise, politics fail to comprehend Sutter; they “have no understanding of his age-old economics” (DR 154). Sutter’s “American Dream” is an American dream as conceived by a Swiss peasant; a dream not of capital and financial markets, but of acquiring and holding land, then acquiring and holding more land. It is a fundamentally feudal dream, and one that makes sense only in an agrarian context. It is also a spiritual dream, as Bochner observes:

The endeavor which fulfills the spiritual need is by that very activity constructive; it is a quality of the endeavor, and not the goal of it. Spiritual worth is discovered by practice and in practicing; hence the familiar, time-honored value of producing from the land and the age-old warning against cupidity; hence also the present tense of the narrative. “Johann August Suter est un homme d’action,” writes Cendrars.

(DR 153)

Certainly, the dream of “New Helvetia” becomes a reality for a time, but ultimately, for all its construction and building and plowed and planted fields, it is ephemeral, a mere footnote in the history of California that becomes dominant, a history of capital and interest and speculation and finance. If gold is cursed, as Cendrars wrote more than once, then Sutter’s project is blessed, even though in the end it comes to ruin.

CHAPTER FOUR
FAULKNER'S GOLD

Though they didn't exactly come to ruin in the sense that Sutter himself did, there are two ill-fated screen treatments of *L'Or* that are worth discussion, neither of which was ever produced: one by William Faulkner, and the other by Sergei Eisenstein. Though Eisenstein's treatment is by far the superior one, Faulkner's is perhaps more germane to the topic of Blaise Cendrars' relationship with America and American literature, since it is through his exposure to and work on *L'Or* that William Faulkner gained the impetus he needed to write what would become one of his best-known novels, *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Eisenstein's film scenario for *Sutter's Gold* is, unsurprisingly, far superior to Faulkner's. After all, Eisenstein was already a well-established cinematic master by the time he wrote the treatment in 1930. Ivor Montagu writes that at the time, Eisenstein "was the nearest thing to a 'universal genius' of the type of Leonardo that the cinema [had] yet produced" (12). Compared to Eisenstein, who was already world-famous for *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1927), Faulkner was a neophyte of the cinema, a hack writer in comparison to Eisenstein the master director and scenarist. That discrepancy certainly shows itself in their respective treatments of *L'Or*.

Eisenstein arrived in the United States in late 1929, where he hoped to learn about recent American developments in the use of sound in motion pictures. Josef Stalin had

instructed him to “study the sound film in detail. This is very important to us. When our heroes discover speech, the influential power of films will increase enormously” (Kahn 146). Stalin presumably had in mind the propaganda value of characters making properly Bolshevik speeches, but Eisenstein’s concerns were more aesthetic and less blunt (though hardly apolitical). He told a New York reporter “that he hoped to make a ‘truly American film’ in Hollywood” and was in the process of choosing the right subject (Richardson 195). After initial disagreements with Paramount, with whom he was contracted to work, Eisenstein persuaded the studio that Blaise Cendrars’ *L’Or* would be his first project. Just before coming to the United States, he had approached Cendrars in Paris and had gained the author’s blessing for the film. “Eisenstein was probably attracted to the novel most by its cinematic style. Cendrars was a novelist, not a historian, and arranged his material on the basis of novelistic effects rather than historical veracity,” writes William Richardson (196). Such an aesthetic must have appealed to Eisenstein, who himself was more concerned with filmic effects rather than verisimilitude.

Once Eisenstein had Paramount on board, he dove headlong into experiencing and researching everything he could about Sutter, the gold rush, and mid-19th-century California. He scoured the archives and museums, and traveled to San Francisco, Sacramento, and Sutter’s Mill, taking photographs and conducting interviews. Then, the research done, he and his assistants returned to Hollywood, where “in a fit of feverish energy, [they] completed the script in three days” (Richardson 196).

Eisenstein’s screen treatment is far more complete than Faulkner’s, and one can only imagine it would have made a far better film. Though he made some additions, “there was much of Cendrars’ original novel still present in the script” (Richardson 196).

There are visual montages, of course (as there are, rendered more clumsily, in Faulkner's *Sutter's Gold*), but there are also aural montages, directions for sound that break new ground:

The sound of the sand moving in the wooden working pans, the dashing of water, begins to creep over the forests and the fields.

The sound of the picks, and the sound of the stones that are discarded from the working pans grows louder and louder.

Still the sound of picks and the hoarse grate of the shovels scraping the stony ground is ever louder and louder, ever more and more insistent.

The sounds pervade the whole land.

And beneath this tearing sound the dominion of Sutter falls to waste and destruction from its own fertility and luxuriance.

The boughs of the fruit trees are cracking with their overburden of ripe fruit.

Barrels are exploding with the over-fermentation of their wine and beer.

Horses, untended and not foddered, break out of their corrals and rush pasturing into the fields of wheat.

Cows fill the air with lowings of pain, their udders unrelieved, and, maddened, they break down the walls of their stables, trampling flowers and vegetables.

...

Sutter, deserted by his people, wanders through this wasted desolation, hearkening to the symphony of the working of the mines.

“Gold.” The word rings through the forest, and its echo goes ringing through the hills and canyons.

And then, from the depths of these canyons, arrives a symphony of new sounds.

These sounds are the sounds of thousands of feet trampling upon
the stones.

The sounds of endless trails of creaking wagons.

The sounds of horses' hooves and the screeching of wagon wheels.

And the murmur of endless mobs.

The first wagon appears near the fort.

(Montagu 181-2)

Critic Christopher Frayling has called Eisenstein's *Sutter's Gold* "an experiment with sound" (18), and Ivor Montagu, who was one of Eisenstein's Hollywood assistants, said that had the script actually been filmed when it was written, "the subsequent development of cinema might have been speeded by a decade" (108). Charlie Chaplin, who had hosted Eisenstein aboard his yacht on a trip to Catalina Island, wrote in his autobiography that the word around Hollywood was that the script was "very fine" (323). The film was never made, and the use of sound in American films remained pedestrian and unimaginative for years to come.

Despite the fact that Eisenstein and his assistants "made detailed financial plans, casting suggestions, set designs and location studies for the projected film . . . Paramount rejected it almost immediately," claiming that the project was too expensive and that

“Americans were not interested in history, in any case” (Richardson 199). The studio’s real reasons for declining to film Eisenstein’s screenplay were otherwise: the cineaste’s reluctance to cast Hollywood stars; his lack of cooperation with Paramount’s publicity staff; leadership struggles within the studio itself; and the executives’ rejection of the script’s core message that gold was inherently corrupting and destructive. Eisenstein’s Bolshevism and even his Jewishness were also issues, despite the fact that the major studios were run by men of Jewish descent. At one point, he even received a phone call “telling him he would be kidnapped and hung by the neck from a Joshua tree in the Mojave Desert” (Richardson 200).

William Faulkner’s *Sutter’s Gold* film project started with some promise. The Hollywood trade magazines reported in 1934 that Howard Hawks intended to direct an adaptation of Cendrars’ novel and that William Faulkner would write the screenplay. Hawks was soon taken off the project, however, and Faulkner’s screen treatment, which was never fleshed out into a full screenplay, was mostly forgotten. Today the typescript of the treatment is held in the Howard Hawks archive at Brigham Young University.

Despite languishing in the archives, and despite being mostly ignored by Faulkner scholars, the *Sutter’s Gold* screen treatment is of interest for a few reasons. First, it establishes a connection between Faulkner, perhaps the premier American modernist prose writer, and Cendrars; second, the treatment shows Faulkner trying out certain techniques and vocabularies that would later become closely associated with his voice and style; and third, because *L’Or / Sutter’s Gold* is a key source for what may be

Faulkner's greatest novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, which was published in 1936, just two years after he was at work on *Sutter's Gold*.

Though Cendrars and Faulkner never met — at least there is no evidence that they did — Faulkner chose to work on *Sutter's Gold*. Whether his attraction was to Cendrars' novel in particular, or to the chance to again work with Howard Hawks (the two had first met in Hollywood in 1932, and Faulkner had written the screenplay for Hawks' 1933 film *Today We Live*), the fact is that in the summer of 1934 Faulkner was hard at work on Cendrars' book. Surely, Cendrars' striking, telegraphic prose style must have caught Faulkner's attention, though it was very different from his own writing. But what likely drew his interest was the novel's plot: a mysterious stranger carving an empire out of the American wilderness, and being ruined by a twist of fate.

Faulkner's 108-page screen treatment of *L'Or* is somewhat awkward, but contains many notably Faulknerian touches. He transforms Sutter into a protagonist of his own making, rather than relying on the character Cendrars made. Faulkner's Sutter "repudiates America as he repudiated Europe" (Faulkner 48), and Faulkner uses one of his favorite words twice in one short phrase. Near the beginning, when Sutter is still in Europe, Faulkner shows him standing in a town square, addressing a crowd of onlookers: "He speaks with impassioned eloquence and conviction, preaching Rousseau [sic] philosophy of man's duty to his fellow man; of the honest rewards of honest toil and honest sweat, the arcadian life of the soil. It is impassioned, sincere, and amateur" (Faulkner 4-5). In Cendrars, no such scene occurs, nor would such a scene occur; Cendrars' Sutter is not the idealist Faulkner would have him be. Without putting too fine

a point on it, Faulkner's treatment of Cendrars' novel could be described just as Faulkner describes Sutter: as impassioned, sincere, and amateur(ish).

Faulkner's Sutter is a man of great principles, whereas Cendrars' Sutter is a man whose main motivations are making his way in the world and acquiring power. Faulkner adds various melodramatic touches to the story, including the death of Sutter's infant child (Faulkner 12-13), Sutter being mugged and robbed as soon as he arrives in New York City (22), Sutter working in a circus and making further speeches about liberty and freedom to caged animals (26), Sutter attempting to rescue a slave who is being whipped, making proclamations about justice and mercy while doing so (28), and an extended, non-Cendrars plotline about a St. Louis dancehall girl named Hannah, her husband, and child. Hannah is raped by two "bravos" and hangs herself (32-36). Hannah's husband turns out to be James Marshall, who will later go west with Sutter and eventually will be the one who first discovers gold on his land. Still in St. Louis, however, Sutter and Marshall and the deceased Hannah's child battle the local crime gang, including the bravos who raped Hannah (to add to the Faulknerian melodrama, there's even an octoroon in the mix, for no apparent reason). The conflict comes to a head when Sutter beats the crime boss to death with a "statue of justice," which breaks off in his hand after he's finished the bloody deed (46). Sutter is indicted for murder and he and Marshall flee for the West. Along the way there's an Indian attack (51 - 53), and disagreements among the members of a wagon train with which they've taken up. Sutter changes from a man of justice to a man out for personal gain. He wheels and deals and the wagon train splits from him. They wind up in Vancouver where Sutter loses the octoroon in a game of fan-tan he plays with Chinese traders. Marshall is horrified.

They arrive in California, where Sutter establishes his trading company. He repeatedly tells Marshall that everything he does is for the sake of Helena, Marshall and Hannah's daughter (with the exception of James Marshall, none of these characters appear in Cendrars' novel). Sutter begins to acquire power, has audiences with the Mexican governor, and establishes his own militia. He oversees the crucifixion of a group of Native American captives. Marshall continually reminds him "of just what his plan of child's wellbeing has cost in grief and injustice" (63). As if the point requires visual reinforcement, the broken statue of justice which Sutter used as a murder weapon is shown again and again. Faulkner indicates the rise of Sutter's agricultural empire in a montage of trees being felled, oxen pulling logs, men and oxen plowing fields, wheat and vines growing, crops being harvested and stored, grapes being crushed, herds of sheep and cattle emerging, and houses being built (66-7). On page 68, Faulkner indicates that a full-screen title be shown on screen: "New Helvetia."

A jump cut, and Sutter is older, now "with graying hair and imperial, rich civilian clothes" (69). His prosperity grows. In his sumptuous office, we see the "statue of justice" mended and on display (71). Marshall finds gold ore (75). Marshall and Helena "realize what gold will be in the hands of Sutter's ruthlessness" and go to the governor with news of the discovery (76). Sutter and a band of Native Americans loyal to him capture Marshall and bind him to an "old crude Spanish torture machine" (77). Marshall is tortured and killed. Sutter gloats and begins calling himself King Sutter. News of the discovery of gold gets out because of Sutter's bragging, but the arrival of gold rush miners isn't shown. Instead, Faulkner inserts a montage that reverses the "prosperity montage" he included earlier; this time we see oxen and plows abandoned in the furrows,

deserted fields, and mobs at the London and Wall Street stock exchanges and the Paris Bourse, broken wine casks, and mice gnawing at sacks of grain. Sutter's house burns down. Sutter digs in the earth madly but can find no gold of his own.

He disappears into San Francisco where his children, who have arrived from Europe, find him. He is disheveled and half-insane. He begins to talk of justice again, and seeks redress from the authorities, who humor him by decorating him with a gold braid. He is paraded through the streets, but not in celebration; he is a laughingstock. Still he pursues his supposed claims, and Faulkner indicates shots showing baskets full of paper claims, lawyer's pens scribbling furiously, and so on. Sutter's claims are allowed. A mob attacks him and murders his son August.

The action then shifts to Washington, D.C., where Sutter continues to seek compensation. He hangs around the Capitol and is teased by ragamuffins. Abraham Lincoln shows up briefly, when an aide tells him about Sutter's appeal and he agrees to hear it (101). Sutter and Lincoln meet, and the president offers Sutter a pension. When Lincoln's secretary offers Sutter the pension check, "Sutter, enraged, takes check, flings it at secretary's face, trembling, talks of justice, vindication, not money" (103). He falls under the sway of an unscrupulous lawyer named Wolff, who promises him millions. Wolff is a caricature, even evilly rubbing his hands together as he obtains Sutter's signature on a document giving Wolff power of attorney (104). Sutter begins making speeches in the street, and Faulkner inserts the text of a newspaper item meant to be shown on screen: "Insane beggar arrested for inciting to riot on capitol grounds. Insists U.S. owes him \$1,000,000. He was later released as harmless. Well-known character about capitol" (106). Sutter continues to loiter about the Capitol, is teased by newsboys,

one of whom tells him that the news has just broken that Sutter has won his case at last. Faulkner closes: “Sutter gasps, reaches for paper, grasps it, drops it, grasps at it, straightens up, clutches his breast, falls forward, newspaper open, falls across his body. Pan slowly to paper: date line Sunday, June 17, 1880. FINAL FADE OUT” (108).

There are numerous discrepancies between Faulkner’s screen treatment and Cendrars’ novel. According to Sarah Gleeson-White in her “William Faulkner, Screenwriter,” the most significant of these “is in characterization: Faulkner transforms Colonel Sutter into a megalomaniac” (431). Though it is certainly true that Faulkner describes Sutter’s will to power differently than does Cendrars, I think both versions are megalomaniacal in that they are both obsessed with power; the difference is in the origin of that drive. Faulkner paints Sutter as a once just and moral man who falls from grace, becomes corrupted by frontier violence, and descends into madness due to the cognitive dissonance wrought by the abandonment of his original ideals. Cendrars recognizes no such fall. In *L’Or*, Sutter is never shown to be overly concerned with morals and justice — in fact, early in the novel, after he has abandoned his wife and children, he robs an innocent group of young German trekkers in order to fund his flight from Switzerland into France and beyond. He only becomes preoccupied with justice when fortune turns against him and he believes that the law can reverse the tide. Cendrars’ Sutter preaches no virtue, though he isn’t overtly evil either. He is a striver, a builder, a wheeler-dealer for whom America, and California in particular, is a land of opportunity. He constructs an empire because he can. He enjoys his power, surely, and becomes intoxicated with it once he possesses it, but his fall isn’t so much a consequence of his moral bankruptcy as it is a strange and simple twist of fate. He isn’t poisoned by gold; he is ruined by it.

Absalom, Absalom! is widely considered to be one of the great American novels of the twentieth century. Sarah Gleeson-White calls it “that quintessential novel of American modernism” (“Auditory Exposures” 92). From his letters and other sources, it is clear that Faulkner was working on it before, during, and after his work on the *Sutter’s Gold* screen treatment. On July 20, 1934, he wrote to his wife, Estelle, from Santa Monica, saying that he had “finished the final treatment of SUTTER” and had “done a little work on the novel [*Absalom, Absalom!*] from time to time” (Blotner 82-3). Faulkner’s novel had its roots, at least in part, in two short stories he’d written previously: “Evangeline,” which he began writing in the mid-1920s, but which wasn’t published until the *Uncollected Stories* came out in 1979; and “Wash,” which was published in *Harper’s* in 1933. Both of these stories contributed to a novel about the character of Colonel Sutpen which had the working title *A Dark House*, but which eventually became *Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner began writing *A Dark House* in February 1934. It would take him two years to finish it, by which time he had changed much of the book, including the title. This time period accords well with the time Faulkner would have been reading and writing a treatment of *L’Or*.

The similarities between Sutter and Sutpen are many. Both men are wanderers who come from afar with the aim of setting up veritable kingdoms in wildernesses: Sutter from Switzerland to California, and Sutpen from West Virginia to Mississippi. Sutter founds New Helvetia and Sutpen establishes Sutpen’s Hundred, a hundred-square mile plantation. Both have dreams of dynasties which will follow them, though crucially Sutpen’s obsession is the propagation of his line whereas Sutter merely has to import his already-existing family from the old country. Both rely on slave labor to tame the wild

places they seek to dominate: Sutter uses Native Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Sutpen uses Africans. There are similarities not only of character, but also of scene: in *L'Or*, there is a passing reference to Sutter boxing “un nègre géant” (OC 2: 126), and one of the key scenes of *Absalom, Absalom!* has Sutpen boxing an African slave. In Faulkner’s novel, the scene is key, primal not only because of the brutality of the fight, but also because the fight is witnessed by Sutpen’s wife, son, and daughter. The fight, which takes place in a barn removed from the main house, and which has the sweating combatants stripped to the waist, prefigures the cross-racial sexual intermingling (and the overriding fear of such) that becomes a prevalent motif in the rest of the book. For Cendrars, the white-on-black boxing match is barely an anecdote, an item in a long list of Sutter’s occupations and activities during his early days in New York. For Faulkner, the scene is one of the most important in his novel, and its resonances expand exponentially, taking on sociocultural and psychological significances that it does not hold for Cendrars. Then there is the similarity in the names Sutter/Sutpen, which cannot help but be noticed. “So many similarities between the lives of Sutter and Sutpen and their homophonic names deny that they are coincidental,” writes Gleeson-White, “so it seems reasonably clear . . . that Faulkner’s writing of ‘Sutter’s Gold’ contributed to his creation of that other nineteenth-century pioneering colonel, Colonel Sutpen” (“William Faulkner, Screenwriter” 432-3). William Faulkner mined Cendrars’ novel twice: once, obviously, for his *Sutter’s Gold* screen treatment, and the second time, in a more surreptitious but no less affecting way for *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Sarah Gleeson-White, in her essay “Auditory Exposures: Faulkner, Eisenstein, and Film Sound,” makes a compelling case that Faulkner “read carefully” Sergei

Eisenstein's *Sutter's Gold* prior to drafting his own treatment. Among many salient characteristics of Eisenstein's treatment is his "experimental use . . . of choric voice" (Gleeson-White 91). There is a "chorus of girls and vigorous young men . . . singing Swiss songs" (Montagu 151), the echoing of "Gold!" that "rings through the forest" (181), and, most significantly for Faulkner, "Sutter . . . Sutter . . . Sutter. . ." that "the world endlessly re-echoes" (185). Faulkner repeats the choric "Sutter Sutter" in his own screen treatment (101), then repackages the chorus for *Absalom, Absalom!* with Yoknapatawpha County's "steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen*" (*Absalom* 32). In his engagement with Cendrars' novel and with Eisenstein's treatment of that novel, Faulkner not only found material he used in his own screen treatment, but also a rich trove of content and exemplars of style that he put to good use in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

L'Or was eventually made into a Hollywood film, *Sutter's Gold* (1936), directed by James Cruze and starring Edward Arnold as Sutter (and apparently including famed American athlete Jim Thorpe in an uncredited walk-on). Writing in the *New York Times* on March 27, 1936, critic Frank S. Nugent described the film as "Tedious, illogical and fanciful . . . one of the major disappointments of the season." Cendrars was credited as one of several screenwriters, but he had absolutely nothing to do with the production. *Sutter's Gold* was poorly reviewed and ended up being a major flop for Universal Pictures.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORAVAGINE

Between 1925 and 1936, Blaise Cendrars was almost constantly on the move. The success of *L'Or* and of *Moravagine* (1926), *Le Plan de l'Aiguille*, and *Les Confessions de Dan Yack* (both 1929) enabled him to travel widely, both in South America and in France, where he crisscrossed the country in his Alfa Romeo that had been customized for him by Georges Braque. In these years he was in Paris (of course), Biarritz, Madrid, Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre (where he and Raymone, who would later become his wife, owned a house together), La Redonne (an isolated *calanque* near Marseilles, where he attempted to finish writing *Le Plan de l'Aiguille* but found that the view from his window of the blue Mediterranean was too much; years later, he wrote that “Un écrivain ne doit jamais s’installer devant un panorama, aussi grandiose soit-il (OC 5: 115)), Nantes, Monpazier (where he met his American translator and champion, John Dos Passos), and the United States, where he crossed the North American continent by train.

The novels he wrote during this period are remarkable. *Moravagine* is perhaps his most frequently-read novel today, and is one of the first books Henry Miller attempted to read in the original French. It is a bizarre tale, narrated by a medical doctor who falls under the spell of one of his patients, the titular Moravagine, whom he helps escape from a heavily-secured asylum. Once free, Moravagine and his doctor/conspirator, who comes to be called Raymond la Science, travel the world, committing murder and fomenting

revolution in the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War. They journey to Berlin, where Moravagine registers as a student under a false name, tends to his studies during the day, and murders young women in dark alleyways by night (prefiguring, perhaps, Fritz Lang's 1931 film *M*); to Russia, where they foment revolution and escape just ahead of a crackdown by the authorities; to the United States, where they crisscross the continent, hunt for gold and diamonds in the desert Southwest, and flee from New Orleans while being pursued by an armed band of would-be robbers; to the mysterious and remote Orinoco of South America, where they live among the Jivaro people, battle malaria, and where Moravagine is hailed as a living god; to France, where they live in Paris and then in Chartres, where Moravagine learns to fly airplanes (it is in Chartres that Blaise Cendrars makes a cameo appearance in his own novel, introduced by Champcommunal, the flying instructor: "Messieurs, dit-il, permettez-moi de vous présenter mon lieutenant, Blaise Cendrars" (OC 2: 390)) and both Raymond la Science and Moravagine join the French military when the First World War breaks out; to Cannes, where Raymond la Science recuperates from the amputation of his left leg, necessitated by a war injury, and in the military hospital encounters Cendrars once again, who has had his right arm amputated; to nearby Sainte-Marguerite island, where Raymond finds Moravagine locked up in "Neurological Center No. 101-B," where he is out of his mind and believes himself to be on the planet Mars, and where he dies: "Moravagine est mort le 17 février dans cette même chambre qui fut si longtemps occupée, sous Louis XIV, par celui que l'histoire connaît sous le nom de l'Homme au Masque de Fer. Pure coïncidence anecdotique et non pas symbolique" (OC 2: 407). Moravagine leaves bundles of his writings to Raymond, with titles such as "L'An 2013,"

“La Fin du Monde,” and “L’Unique Mot de la Langue Martienne.” Raymond says that Moravagine is buried in a military cemetery on Sainte-Marguerite, where the following inscription is traced on his tombstone: “CI-GÎT UN ÉTRANGER” (OC 2: 425).

Moravagine is a much-studied novel, and with good reason. In addition to its globetrotting and mayhem and serial murdering, the book offers extended flights of philosophical fancy touching on psychology, sociology, medicine, linguistics, and other diverse fields. For purposes of this study, however, one chapter is crucial: chapter “m” (instead of being given numbers, the chapters correspond to the letters of the alphabet, a to z), titled “Nos Randonnées en Amérique.” Despite its title, the chapter doesn’t recount Raymond and Moravagine’s rambles in America. Instead, it is a rumination on modernity, with the United States serving as an exemplar of “le principe de l’utilité.” Cendrars begins:

Pour un homme d’aujourd’hui, les U.S.A. offrent un des plus beaux spectacles du monde. Ce machinisme intensif fait penser à l’industrie prodigieuse des hommes de la préhistoire. Quand on rêve dans la carcasse d’un gratte-ciel ou dans le pullman d’un rapide américain, on découvre immédiatement le principe de l’utilité.

(OC 2: 345)

This principle of utility isn’t new or unique to the United States, though for Cendrars it finds its apogee in America. It existed for prehistoric humans too, “l’homme des cavernes qui emmanchait sa hache de pierre, qui en incurvait le manche pour l’avoir mieux en

main” (OC 2: 345). In modernity, the principle of utility (which turns out to be also an aesthetic principle) manifests itself in “les routes, les canaux, les voies ferrées, les ports, les contreforts et les murs de soutènement et les talus, les lignes électriques à haute tension, les conduits d’eau, les ponts, les tunnels, toutes ces lignes droites et ces courbes qui dominent le paysage contemporain,” all of which “imposent leur géométrie grandiose” (OC 2: 345). But the most powerful expression of this principle, according to Cendrars, is found in the specialization of agriculture:

En moins de cinquante ans, elle a transformé l’aspect du monde dont elle dirige l’exploitation avec une maîtrise étonnante. Il lui faut des produits, des matières premières, des plantes, des animaux à broyer, à triturer, à transformer. Alors, elle dissocie et désagrège. Sans aucun souci de la nature de chaque région, elle acclimate telle culture, elle proscriit telle plante, elle bouleverse telle économie séculaire. La monoculture tend à transformer, sinon la planète, du moins chacune des zones de la planète. L’agriculture d’aujourd’hui, basée sur l’économie du travail humain, soulagé à la fois par le travail de l’animal et l’emploi d’un outillage perfectionné qui, parti de la charrue, aboutit aux machines agricoles modernes, agriculture de plus en plus scientifique, excelle à adapter les plantes au terrain et au climat, à fournir au sol des engrais abondants et rationnellement distribués. Elle ne cultive, relativement à la surabondance végétale de la nature, qu’un tout petit nombre d’espèces judicieusement choisies. Il y a chez l’homme moderne un besoin de simplification qui

tend à se satisfaire par tous les moyens. Et cette monotonie artificielle qu'il s'efforce de créer, et cette monotonie qui envahit de plus en plus le monde, cette monotonie est le signe de notre grandeur. Elle marque l'empreinte d'une volonté, d'une volonté utilitaire; elle est l'expression d'une unité, d'une loi qui régit toute notre activité moderne: la loi de l'utilité.

(OC 2: 345-6)

Cendrars, writing in 1926, is remarkably prescient here, and in fact throughout this chapter of *Moravagine*. The specialization and concentration of agriculture he notes have become even more prevalent in the past nine decades. The transformation of animals, plants, and raw materials into rearranged and reconfigured products that he describes seems well-fitted to the processed foods that flood our markets and clog our digestive tracts today. The cultivation of food plants all over the world, without regard for natural patterns of species distribution, is a truthful foreshadowing of the mechanisms of agriculture in the global economy.

Modernity, according to Cendrars, seems impossibly complex, and perhaps paradoxically gives rise to a powerful need for simplification, for an imposition of order and precision:

Il y a chez l'homme moderne un besoin de simplification qui tend à se satisfaire par tous les moyens. Et cette monotonie artificielle qu'il s'efforce de créer, et cette monotonie qui envahit de plus en plus le

monde, cette monotonie est le signe de notre grandeur. Elle marque l’empreinte d’une volonté, d’une volonté utilitaire; elle est l’expression d’une unité, d’une loi qui régit toute notre activité moderne: la loi de l’utilité.

La loi de l’utilité a été formulée par les ingénieurs. Par elle, toute la complexité apparente de la vie contemporaine s’ordonne et se précise. Par elle, toute la complexité apparente de la vie contemporaine s’ordonne et se précise. Par elle, l’industrialisation à outrance se justifie et par elle les aspects les plus nouveaux, les plus surprenants, les plus inattendus de notre civilisation rejoignent les plus hauts sommets atteints par les plus grandes civilisations de tous les temps. Car c’est grâce à ce principe de l’utilité, à cette loi de constance intellectuelle que nous pouvons remonter la filière de l’activité humaine.

(OC 2: 346)

Cendrars writes that the traces of early human activity revealed to us by archaeology are fundamentally utilitarian in nature; not art objects per se, but utilitarian objects artfully made. The bone and shell fragments we find are shaped and fashioned. Flints are chipped and stones are polished. Pottery is decorated “par incision . . . en relief, en trochisque ou pastillage, enduites de barbotine ou sobrement dessinées, recouvertes de motifs décoratifs abstraits, pleins d’invention et infiniment variés, qui sont souvent les premiers signes d’écriture” (OC 2: 346).

He notes the ubiquity of such artifacts across the globe, on every continent and from diverse time periods.

Turning back to the modern era, and to its chaos (world wars, bloody revolutions), in which “se refondent et se reforment toutes les membrures du corps politique,” Cendrars sees the rise of a new organizing force which he claims the old world could not have foreseen:

Dans ce désordre apparent une forme de société humaine s'impose et domine le tumulte. Elle travaille, elle crée. Elle transforme toutes les valeurs en pratiquant le krach et le boom. Elle a su jaillir des contingences. Aucune théorie classique, aucune conception abstraite, aucune idéologie n'avait pu la prévoir. C'est une force formidable qui aujourd'hui étroit le monde entier, et le façonne, et le pétrit. C'est la grande industrie moderne à forme capitaliste.

Une société anonyme.

Elle n'a eu recours qu'au principe de l'utilité pour donner aux peuples innombrables de la terre l'illusion de la parfaite démocratie, du bonheur, de l'égalité et du confort. On construit des ports angulaires, des routes en palier, des villes géométriques. Puis des canaux et des chemins de fer. Enfin des ponts, des ponts en bois, en fer, puis suspendus à des fils d'acier. Des usines cubiques, des machines ahurissantes, un million de petits

appareils rigolos qui font le travail domestique. Enfin l'on respire. L'automatisme compénètre la vie quotidienne. Évolution. Progrès économique. Application stricte d'une loi intégrale, d'une loi de constance, du principe de l'utilité, car les ingénieurs qui ont retrouvé la norme ne connaissent pas d'autre condition à cette évolution sociale qu'ils provoquent, hygiène, santé, sports, luxe, que le principe de l'utilité. Ils créent tous les jours de nouveaux engins. Les lignes sont rentrées, aucune saillie, de longues surfaces portantes pour les trépidations et les courbes: simplicité, élégance, propreté. Ces nécessités exigent également l'emploi de formes nouvelles et des matériaux mieux appropriés, aciers trempés, verre effilé, nickel et barres de cuivre qui se marient si bien à la vitesse. Modes éblouissants d'éclairage. Essieux articulés, châssis surbaissés, lignes convergentes, profils fuyants, frein sur toutes les roues, emploi de métaux précieux pour les moteurs, emploi de matières nouvelles pour les carrosseries, grandes surfaces lisses: netteté, sobriété, luxe. Rien ne rappelle plus la voiture et le cheval d'antan. C'est un ensemble nouveau de lignes et de formes, une véritable œuvre plastique.

Plastique.

Œuvre d'art, œuvre d'esthétique, œuvre anonyme, œuvre destinée à la foule, aux hommes, à la vie, aboutissant logique du principe de l'utilité.

(OC 2: 349-50)

In this passage, Cendrars' language is reminiscent of the language of Deleuze and Guattari: new machines, new combinations of lines and forms, lines both pure and converging, articulated axles, surfaces solid and large and, above all, smooth. I am also reminded of the smirking, winking Mr. McGuire in the 1967 American film classic *The Graduate*, who says to Dustin Hoffman's character Benjamin, "I just want to say one word to you. Just one word. Plastics."

These musings come in the only chapter of *Moravagine* devoted exclusively to America because for Cendrars, modern America represents the apotheosis of the principle of utility. "C'est le grand honneur du jeune peuple américain," Cendrars writes, "d'avoir retrouvé le principe de l'utilité et ses innombrables applications dont les plus élémentaires bouleversent déjà la vie, la pensée et le cœur humains." What is this American quality that defines modernity as American? "Pragmatisme. Un rond n'est plus un cercle mais devient une roue. Et cette roue tourne" (OC 2: 351). American filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen echo Cendrars' "useful circle" in their 1994 film *The Hudsucker Proxy*, in which the simpleminded Norville Barnes has one great idea that he presents to the industrialists at the Hudsucker Corporation: a plain, perfect circle, which he's sketched on a yellowed piece of paper that he keeps in his shoe. His pitch to the corporate board is only this: "You know, for kids!" From this, the hula hoop is born, and millions are sold. Though in *Moravagine* Cendrars hardly imagined the hula hoop per se, the film's depiction of circle-sketch transforming by way of industry to plastic best-selling fad is certainly in keeping with his ideas concerning the principle of utility and its ultimate expression in American society.

Modernity brings the world closer together. Shipping by sea and travel by air make disparate, distant places resemble each other: “Son travail prodigieux apparente des pays géographiquement, historiquement étrangers les uns aux autres pour leur donner une ressemblance: Aden, Dakar, Alger, ports d’escale Bombay, Hong-kong, ports de triage; Boston, New York, Barcelone, Rotterdam, Anvers, débouchés de régions industrielles” (OC 2: 351). All of this commercial and cultural activity engenders “un langage nouveau” (OC 2: 351). The shipping lines radically reduce travel times so that one can go from Victoria to Hong Kong in ten days. Obviously, time of transit has been reduced much farther since Cendrars made these observations in 1926.

But the impact of modernity, which finds its paragon in America and things American, does not manifest itself only in industrial processes, agricultural advances and rewritten timetables and shortened itineraries. Cendrars writes powerfully of modernity’s force in reshaping human language and thought as well as the tangible world:

Oui, dans ce travail prodigieux, au milieu de tout ce coton, ce caoutchouc, ce café, ce riz, ce liège, ces arachides, ces kyriales de Pustet, ces saumons de fonte, ce fil de fer de 2/10, ces moutons, ces conserves, ces caisses de poulets, ce frigo, ces insignes du Sacré-Cœur, ces rhapsodies de Liszt, ce phosphate, ces bananes, ces aciers en T, la langue, — des mots et des choses, et des disques et des runes, et du portugais et du chinois, et des chiffres et des marques de fabrique, des patentes industrielles, des timbres-poste, des billets de passage, des feuilles de connaissance, le code des signaux, la T.S.F., — la langue se refait et prend corps, la langue qui est le

reflet de la conscience humaine, la poésie qui fait connaître l'image de l'esprit qui la conçoit, le lyrisme qui est une façon d'être et de sentir, l'écriture démotique, animée du cinéma qui s'adresse à la foule impatiente des illettrés, les journaux qui ignorent la grammaire et la syntaxe pour mieux frapper l'œil avec les placards typographiques des annonces, les prix pleins de sensibilité sous une cravate dans une vitrine, les affiches multicolores et les lettres gigantesques qui étayent les architectures hybrides des villes et qui enjambent les rues, les nouvelles constellations électriques qui montent chaque soir au ciel, l'abécédaire des fumées dans le vent du matin.

Aujourd'hui.

Profond aujourd'hui.

(OC 2: 352)

But changes in industry, commerce, agriculture, architecture, transportation, and communication do not happen without affecting the human soul as well. Cendrars closes the chapter "Nos Randonnées en Amérique" with the following, stunning paragraphs:

Tout change de proportion, d'angle, d'aspect. Tout s'éloigne, tout se rapproche, cumule, manque, rit, s'affirme, et s'exaspère. Les produits des cinq parties du monde figurent dans le même plat, sur la même robe. On se

nourrit des sueurs de l'or à chaque repas, à chaque baiser. Tout est artificiel et réel. Les yeux. La main. L'immense fourrure des chiffres sur laquelle la banque se vautre. La fureur sexuelle des usines. La roue qui tourne. L'aile qui plane. La voix qui s'en va au long d'un fil. L'oreille dans un cornet. L'orientation. Le rythme. La vie.

Toutes les étoiles sont doubles et si l'esprit s'épouvante à la pensée d'un infiniment petit que l'on vient de découvrir, comment voulez-vous que l'amour n'en soit pas bouleversé?

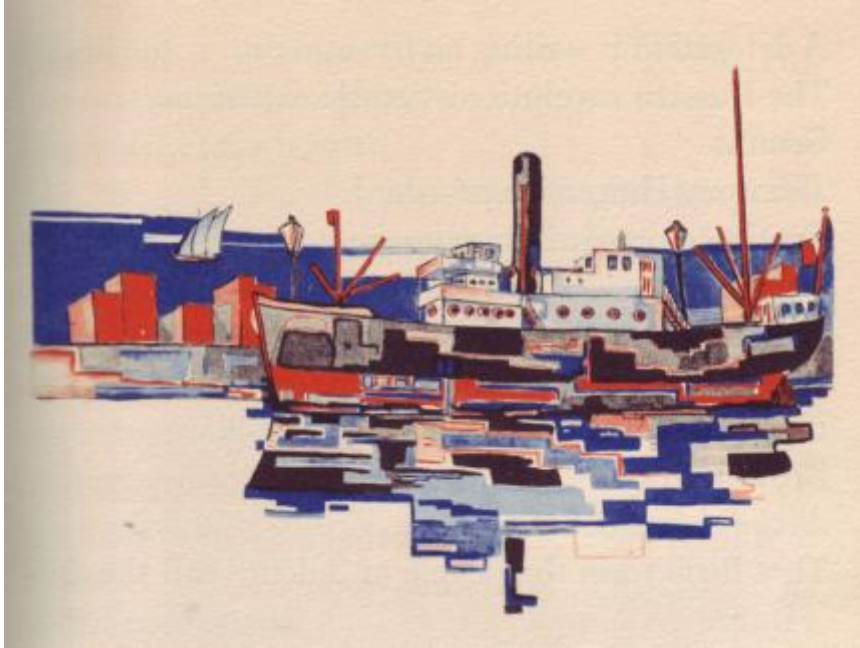
(OC 2: 352)

Modernity is an inside as well as an outside job. Progress is paradox, bringing us closer and farther from one another. This chapter of *Moravagine*, really a philosophical essay tucked inside an otherwise mostly plot-heavy, rollicking novel, gives a compelling and beautiful take on this paradox.

CHAPTER SIX

JOHN DOS PASSOS AND THE HOMER OF THE TRANS-SIBERIAN

The writer John Dos Passos (1896 – 1970) was Blaise Cendrars' earliest American champion, and was single-handedly responsible for introducing him to the American reading public by way of both published translations of Cendrars' work and articles about the French writer he so admired. It was Dos Passos who, in a piece published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* on October 16, 1926 (and reprinted in Dos Passos' very fine 1927 book *Orient Express*), christened Cendrars the "Homer of the Trans-Siberian," a moniker that stuck. In 1931, he published the first substantial, book-length English-language translation of Cendrars' poems: *Panama, or the Adventures of My Seven Uncles*, containing "Le Panama," "Le Transsibérien," and excerpts from *Kodak: Documentaire*. He not only translated the poems from their French originals, but also illustrated the volume with striking watercolors:



In his translator's foreword, Dos Passos writes that:

The poetry of Blaise Cendrars was part of the creative tidal wave that spread over the world from the Paris of before the last European war. Under various tags: futurism, cubism, vorticism, modernism, most of the best work in the arts in our time has been the direct product of this explosion, that had an influence in its sphere comparable with that of the October revolution in social organization and politics and the Einstein formula in physics.

...

Meanwhile, in America at least, poetry (or verse, or little patches of prose cut into inevitable lengths on the page, or whatever you want to call it) has, after Masters, Sandberg, and the Imagists, subsided again into parlor entertainment for high school English classes. The stuffed shirts have

come out of their libraries everywhere and rule literary taste. Library philosophies vaguely favorable to fascism, pederasty, and the snobmysticism⁵ of dying religion, absorb the attention of “poets.” A young man just starting to read verse in the year 1930 would have a hard time finding out that this method of putting words together had only recently passed through a period of virility, intense experimentation, and meaning in everyday life.

For the sake of this hypothetical young man and for the confusion of Humanists, stuffed shirts in editorial chairs, anthology compilers and prize poets, sonnetwriters and readers of bookchats, I think it has been worthwhile to attempt to turn these alive informal personal everyday poems of Cendrars’ into English, in spite of the obvious fact that poetry by its very nature can’t be lifted out of the language in which it was written. I only hope it will at least induce people to read the originals.

(vii-ix)

Dos Passos wrote this in 1931, five years after he’d laid the groundwork with his “Homer of the Trans-Siberian” essay. He was now giving American readers what he had earlier prepared them for: English-language translations of some of the best of Cendrars’ prewar poetry.

⁵ Dos Passos was fond of forming compound words that don’t exist in any dictionary. When quoting from his written work, I’ve respected his choices.

“Homer of the Trans-Siberian” is a remarkable piece, and works just as well as a chapter in Dos Passos’ *Orient Express* as it does as a stand-alone advocacy of Cendrars.

Dos Passos begins with what may or not be a dream about the Paris Exposition of 1900:

At the Paris exposition of 1900—but perhaps this is all a dream, perhaps I heard someone tell about it; no, it must have happened—somewhere between the Eiffel Tower and the Trocadero there was a long shed. In that shed was a brand-new train of the Trans-Siberian, engine, tender, baggage coach, sleeping-cars, restaurant-car. The shed was dark like a station. You walked up wooden steps into the huge dark varnished car. It was terrible. The train was going to start. As you followed the swish of dresses along the corridor the new smell gave you gooseflesh. The train smelled of fresh rubber, of just-bought toys, of something varnished and whirring and oily. The little beds were made up, there were mirrors, glittering washbasins, a bathtub. The engine whistled. No, don’t be afraid; look out of the window. We were moving. No, outside a picture was moving, houses slipping by, bluish-greenish hills. The Urals. Somebody says names in my ear. Lake Baikal. Irkutsk. Siberia. Yangtse, Mongolia, pagodas, Peking. Rivers twisting into the bluish-greenish hills and the close electric smell of something varnished and whirring and oily moving hugely, people in boats, junks, Yellow Sea, pagodas, Peking.

(268-9)

Of course, Dos Passos *has* heard “someone tell about it”; Blaise Cendrars himself, who had described his own experience of the illusory movement of the wagon-lits at the 1900 Paris Exposition (as related in Miriam Cendrars’ biography of her father, page 100). Curiously, however, Cendrars had not written about his 1900 experience as of the time Dos Passos wrote his article in 1926; Miriam Cendrars relates the story without attribution, suggesting it was a family tale Blaise often told. Since Dos Passos is not referring to a written source for his description—and he does not claim that he is, but instead writes that he either dreamed the episode or was told it by someone—it is reasonable to think that Cendrars told him about the Exposition in person.

Dos Passos continues, not yet naming Cendrars but wondering about those who boarded the stationary train at the Exposition and whose childhood imaginations were fired by fin-de-siècle adventure tales (as were Cendrars’ own), drafting a maximalist catalogue that is absolutely Cendrarsian in character:

I’ve often wondered about the others who had tickets taken for them on that immovable train of the Trans-Siberian in the first year of the century, whose childhood was full of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* and Jules Verne’s *sportsmen* and *globetrotters* (if only the ice holds on Lake Baikal) and Chinese Gordon stuttering his last words over the telegraph at Khartoum, and Carlotta come back mad from Mexico setting fire to a palace at Terveuren full of Congolese curiosities, fetishes of human hair, ithyphallic idols with shells for teeth and arms akimbo, specimens of crude rubber in

jars; and those magnates in panama hats shunted slowly in private cars,
reeking with mint and old Bourbon . . .

(269-70)

Cendrars himself was much enamored of Jules Verne, beginning in his youth, and the “magnates in panama hats” recall the financiers of the failed efforts of the French to build a canal in Panama between 1881 and 1894. Still, Dos Passos has not named Cendrars, but is only laying the groundwork for his forthcoming claim that Cendrars is an artist to be reckoned with.

When he does finally name the subject of his essay, it is in this striking and peculiar fashion:

Most likely this craze for transportation, steamboats, trains, motorbuses, mules, camels, is only a vicious and intricate form of kif, a bad habit contracted in infancy, fit only to delight a psychoanalyst cataloguing manias. Like all drugs, you have to constantly increase the dose. One soothing thought; while our bodies are tortured in what Blaise Cendrars calls the squirrelcage of the meridians, maybe our souls sit quiet in that immovable train, in the darkvarnished newsmelling Trans-Siberian watching the panorama of rivers and seas and mountains endlessly unroll.

(272-3)

Dos Passos echoes what Cendrars might have meant when he famously wrote in *Moravagine* of “les phénomènes de cette hallucination congénitale qu’est, à mes yeux, l’activité irradiante, continue de la conscience” (OC 2: 243). Our mania for motion and our hunger for the chaos of modernity is as addictive as any drug, the only saving grace being that perhaps the soul may sit in contemplation of what it knows to be illusory and transitory. Cendrars often described himself as a contemplative in motion, a “Brahman à rebours.” A 1960 book on Cendrars by Richard Montague Payne is subtitled *From Action to Contemplation*. The tension between action and contemplation, and the possible resolution of that tension, is ancient, and is still a relevant (and even pressing) matter today.⁶

Once Dos Passos names his subject, the remainder of the essay is a full-throated advocacy for him. Dos Passos asserts that the moment is exactly right for Cendrars:

Now’s the time for the Homeric hymns of the railroads. Blaise Cendrars has written some of them already in salty French sonorous and direct as the rattle of the great express trains. Carl Sandburg has written one or two. I’m going to try to string along some inadequately translated fragments of “Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jeanne de France.” It fits somehow in this hotel room with its varnished pine furniture and its blue slopjar and its faded dusteaten windowcurtains. Under the balcony are some trees I

⁶ For instance, influential American Franciscan theologian Fr. Richard Rohr has named his facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico the Center for Action and Contemplation. There he teaches an engagement in the world that is nevertheless grounded in contemplative practice, a program which has its roots in the writing and thought of figures such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and other mystics and saints.

don't know the name of, the empty tracks of the narrow gauge, a road churned by motortrucks. It's raining. A toad is shrilling in the bushes. As the old earth-shaking engines are scrapped one by one, the mythmakers are at work. Eventually they will be all ranged like Homer's rambling gods in the rosy light of an orderly Olympus. Here's the hymn of the Trans-Siberian . . .

(273-4)

He then proceeds to render in English fifty or so lines of Cendrars' "Transsibérien," just to give a taste of the longer poem. He summarizes the rest, presumably for the sake of word count, and notes that much of what Cendrars describes in the poem could not have been seen from the false windows of the train cars at the Paris Exposition, could not have been painted on any rolling scrim, since such details can only come from life and could not have even been imagined from inside the stationary wagon-lit of Cendrars' youth:

And so he goes on piling up memories of torn hurtling metal, of trains of sixty locomotives at full steam disappearing in the direction of Port Arthur, of hospitals and whores and jewelry merchants, memories of the first great exploit of the Twentieth Century seen through sooty panes, beaten into his brain by the uneven rumble of the broad-gauge Trans-Siberian. Crows in the sky, bodies of men in heaps along the tracks, burning hospitals, an embroidery unforeseen in that stately panorama

unfolding rivers and lakes and mountains in the greenish dusk of the shed
at the Exposition Universelle.

(277)

A “stately panorama” can never reveal the true violence and mayhem of the world, much as the “stuffed shirt” art Dos Passos decries in his translator’s preface can never provide us with anything but hazy, empty fantasy that is contrary to actual life.

Dos Passos next describes and offers a few lines from “Le Panama” before turning his attention to *L’Or*, of which he writes:

And Blaise Cendrars has since written the history of General Johann August Sutter, *L’Or*, a narrative that traces the swiftest leanest parabola of anything I’ve ever read, a narrative that cuts like a knife through the washy rubbish of most French writing of the present time, with its lemon-colored gloves and its rosewater and its holy water and its policier-gentleman cosmopolitan affectation. It’s probably because he really is, what the Quai d’Orsay school pretend to be, an international vagabond, that Cendrars has managed to capture the grandiose rhythms of America of seventy-five years ago, the myths of which our generation is just beginning to create. (As if anyone ever really was anything; he’s a good writer, leave it at that.) In *L’Or* he’s packed the tragic and turbulent

absurdity of '49 into a skyrocket. It's over so soon you have to read it again for fear you have missed something.

(280-1)

In describing *L'Or* as swift and lean, Dos Passos shows his affinity for the telegraphic, cinematic style Cendrars employs in the novel, a style that Dos Passos himself would employ in his own *U.S.A* trilogy, published between 1930 and 1936.

Dos Passos offers a few translations of poems from *Kodak: Documentaires* (1924) and, concerning these poems, writes that “Blaise Cendrars seems to have rather specialised in America, in the U. S. preferring the happier Southern and Western sections to the Bible-worn hills of New England” (282). A more direct statement about Blaise Cendrars’ connection to America can hardly be imagined. Dos Passos perhaps knew at the time that the poems in *Kodak* were formed from the cut-up texts of various novels of American adventure by Gustave Le Rouge, a fact that Cendrars did not publically confess until his 1945 book *L'Homme foudroyé*. After all, as Jay Bochner notes:

The small choice from *Kodak* [in Dos Passos’ 1931 book of Cendrars translations] most especially seems to reflect discussions at Monpazier, as Dos Passos chooses two of the only three poems—out of a total of forty-four—which are not borrowed from a novel by Gustave Le Rouge. Obviously, Cendrars warned his American friend against these texts which had already “traveled” —which had already been translated, we might

say—from the potboiler novel *Le Mystérieux Dr. Cornelius* to the “anti-poetic” poetry of *Kodak*.

(“Translating the Unknown Soldier” 332)

But the origin of the poems makes no difference in terms of their impact on Dos Passos, or in their shaping of the Cendrars to whom Dos Passos is trying to introduce American readers:

In *Kodak* there are poems about New York, Alaska, Florida, hunting wild turkey and duck in a country of birchtrees off in the direction of Winnipeg, a foggy night in Vancouver, a junk in a Pacific harbor unloading porcelain and swallowsnests, bambootips and ginger, the stars melting like sugar in the sky of some island passed to windward by Captain Cook, elephant-hunting in a jungle roaring with torrents of rain; and at the end a list of menus featuring iguana and green turtle, Red River salmon and shark’s fins, sucklingpig with fried bananas, crayfish in pimento, breadfruit, fried oysters and guavas, dated en voyage 1887–1923. 1887 must be the date of his birth.

(284-5)

1887 was indeed the date of Cendrars’ birth, and 1923 was the year before *Kodak* was published. As impressed as he is with Cendrars’ lists and menus and the details of his supposed travels, Dos Passos does assume that the poems come from experience—from

actual travels rather than from the pages of another writer's books, from the metaphorical moving train instead of the moving scrim. Does it make a difference whether or not Cendrars made the travels reflected in *Kodak*? This is the sort of question that has dogged Cendrars scholars for decades, for it isn't only the experiences of *Kodak* that are called into question (that question actually seems to have been definitively answered by Cendrars himself), but virtually the entire body of his work as it relates to his biography. Did he ever really travel on the Transsiberian railroad? Most think so, some think not. How many times did he travel to Brazil? The answer is unclear. While in South America, did he really stash a multi-volume written work titled *Notre pain quotidien* in the safe deposit boxes of different banks, using various pseudonyms while doing so? It's doubtful, but possible. Did he in fact write a long poem, "Au cœur du monde," then hide it in an attic for future generations to find (or not), as he told interviewer Michael Manoll in 1952?:

J'ai dit qu'en 1917 je venais d'écrire un poème qui m'a stupéfié moi-même par son amplitude, par sa modernité, par tout ce que j'y mettais. Il était tellement antipoétique! J'en étais ravi. Et à ce moment-là, j'ai décidé de ne pas le publier et de laisser toute la poésie moderne patauger et se débrouiller sans moi pour voir ce qu'il en adviendrait. J'ai cloué ce poème inédit dans une caisse, cette caisse, je l'ai mise dans un grenier à la campagne, je m'étais fixé dix ans avant de le sortir, de le publier. Il y a

plus de trente ans de cela et je crois que le moment n'est pas encore venu de le publier.

(OC 8: 548)

Though Dos Passos seems to have taken Cendrars for a writer of lived experience par excellence, revelations and scholarship since his time have cast doubt on whether or not this was necessarily the case. But such doubt does not diminish Cendrars' value to his readers. Dore Ashton, writing in *Raritan* in 2011, says:

I have always thought of [Cendrars] as a great fabulist, not to mention a great fibber, which is, after all, the fate of all writers, always obliged to invent. Long before I sought him out in Paris, which turned out to be shortly before he died, I had understood the fictive tenor of his voice. But since he was such a grand storyteller whom I could not resist, I chose to believe him. Or perhaps make-believe him.

...

Now here is the curious thing: I knew before I ever set foot in his sanctum that Cendrars was a grand fibber, a kind of modern Boccaccio, but the instant he began relating his various anecdotes, I believed him. I not only believed him but entered his imaginary life completely, and only after, as I walked toward the metro, did I smile to myself and concede, reluctantly,

to the thought that perhaps he spun those tales to the situation, old enchanter that he was.

(17, 32)

Later in her long essay, Ashton returns to the theme of Cendrars as fabulist:

Vico's *corsi e ricorsi*, those spiraling events called history, seemed to underpin Cendrars' thinking. He was a grand fibber, yes, but also Vico's motto *Verum ipsum factum*—the truth is made—suits him very well. In his universe, he created his truths and did not linger to verify them. And I, as a young reader, always believed him.

(39)

I suspect that Dos Passos, if he in fact knew that *Kodak* was not the result of Cendrars' real-life travels, would not have been disappointed. Likely he would have been amazed by the tales nonetheless, perhaps more so. Given his own aesthetic tendencies toward montage and found material so prominently on display in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, he would surely have been impressed with Cendrars' writerly ingenuity.

Toward the end of "Homer of the Trans-Siberian," Dos Passos lets on that he believes Cendrars is up to something transmutative, even magical, and is not just a mere recorder of lived experience:

From Paris has spread in every direction a certain esperanto of the arts that has “modern” for its “trademark.” Blaise Cendrars is an itinerant Parisian well versed in this as in many other dialects. He is a kind of medicineman trying to evoke the things that are our cruel and avenging gods. Turbines, triple-expansion engines, dynamite, high tension coils. Navigation, speed, flight, annihilation. No medicine has been found strong enough to cope with them; in cubist Paris they have invented some fetishes and gris-gris that many are finding useful.

(285-6)

One such “invention” may be an imagination like Cendrars’ that fabulates because modernity has become too vast and too complicated to experience personally. Dos Passos’ naming of Cendrars as a Homer of the modern is no groundless appellation—he sees in him a spirit capable of making myth out of the daunting and often terrifying realities of his time. The truth value of these myths becomes less important than their mythic force, their archetypal power, and thus the question of whether or not Cendrars is lying fades into the background and becomes a query important for biographers only, not for fellow artists and readers seeking pleasure and passion and meaning. Thus, as with Homer, Cendrars’ myths become truer and more vital than factual truth.

Dos Passos elaborates this need for a bard of modernity in the concluding paragraph of “Homer of the Trans-Siberian”:

Out of the Babel of city piled on city, continent on continent, the world squeezed small and pulled out long, bouncing like a new rubber ball, we get what? Certainly not peace. That is why in this age of giant machines and scuttle-headed men it is a good thing to have a little music. We need sons of Homer going about the world beating into some sort of human rhythm the shrieking hullabaloo, making us less afraid.

(289)

So for Dos Passos, Cendrars relieves us from fear, provides us a sort of joy that transcends disaster, that lends us a bit of peace. Cendrars doesn't represent a wholesale rejection of the modern; instead, he transmutes modernity into an acceptable currency, finds a "human rhythm" amid the cacophony.

John Dos Passos and Blaise Cendrars had a close personal relationship, and were kindred spirits in a way that Henry Miller and Cendrars never were. Dos Passos and Cendrars had many life experiences in common: both had been educated in a series of European boarding schools, both had traveled the globe (Dos Passos at least as widely, if not more so, than Cendrars), and both had served in combat situations in the First World War (Dos Passos was a volunteer ambulance driver in France and in northern Italy). Interestingly, both men changed their names in the spring of 1912, and both were in New York City at the time; Dos Passos took the name of his absentee father (he had previously gone by his mother's last name, Madison), and Freddy Sauser adopted the nom de plume

Blaise Cendrars (Bochner, “Translating” 327). But the bond between the two men went deeper than mere biographical similarities, as Jay Bochner explains:

Both boys had been scarred by restless voyages out of their control, displacement as a way of life, which produced a yearning, an indefinite sort of homesickness, coupled with a habit of that yearning, an edgy need, even a familiarity which ultimately found a sort of comfort in displacement and rootlessness. These are the qualities which drew Dos Passos to the poetry of Cendrars.

(“Translating” 327)

The two men would be drawn together in ways their correspondence and reminiscences of one another make clear. The affection Cendrars felt for Dos Passos, and the esteem in which he held his work, supersedes what Cendrars expressed for Miller. His letters to Miller, though friendly, were almost always brief, whereas his letters to Dos Passos are more expansive. More importantly, Cendrars worked to translate and promote Dos Passos’ novels *The 42nd Parallel* and *1919*, effort he never put forth for Miller (aside from his review of *Tropic of Cancer*, which, as noted below, he didn’t remember writing 25 years after the fact). Cendrars did, however, dedicate a chapter to each American in his 1948 book *Bourlinguer*; “Rotterdam” to Miller and “Bordeaux” to Dos Passos (and to his wife, Kate). The dedication of “Bordeaux” reads:

A
 JOHN DOS PASSOS
 en souvenir
 de la corne d'aurochs
 de la Valentine que nous avons fait
 retenir aux Eyzies . . .
 et
 à la MÉMOIRE de Kate.
 l'ami BLAISE

(OC 6: 38)

Additionally, the “Bordeaux” chapter of *Bourlinguer* is subtitled “La Grosse Galette,” which in English means “The Big Money.” *The Big Money* is also the title of the 1936 Dos Passos book that concludes his *U.S.A.* trilogy.

When and where the two men first met is unclear. Jay Bochner writes that “Homer of the Trans-Siberian” (1926), was written “some time before they met” (DR 71), whereas Miriam Cendrars says that they had known each other “depuis l’époque des Ballets suédois et du joyeux temps des fêtes chez Gerald Murphy, à Saint-Cloud et à La Garoupe,” which would place their meeting before 1925. Monique Chedford, in her “Chronologie et bibliographie de Blaise Cendrars,” puts the date of their first meeting in October 1924, in Paris, but Jay Bochner writes that “we cannot see the evidence for this”

(“Translating,” Bochner 328).⁷ In any case, what is beyond dispute is that Cendrars and Dos Passos met in Paris and then spent time together the village of Monpazier, in the Périgord Noir (there is even a discrepancy concerning the date of that visit, however: Miriam Cendrars says 1929, Jay Bochner says 1930). In his memoir *The Best Times*, Dos Passos writes about seeing Cendrars in Paris:

Katy [Dos Passos’ wife] and I rode the *bateaux-mouches* in the ruddy winter sunlight. We lunched at Sceau-Robinson, and I made a round of the cafés with Blaise Cendrars, whose poetry I was very much smitten with at the time, and the white Samoyed dog that was his inseparable companion. Cendrars was as diverting as his writing, but I was getting further away from the *vie littéraire* with every passing year.

(112)

Whenever and wherever they first met, it is clear from their correspondence that Dos Passos and Cendrars knew each other before they met in 1930. One piece of evidence is Cendrars very friendly, even chatty, letter to Dos Passos sent on October 2, 1929:

Mon cher John Dos Passos,

Je suis toujours très heureux de recevoir de vos nouvelles. Je suis pour le moment à Biarritz, ou je resterai jusqu’à la fin de l’année et ou, comme

⁷ Jay Bochner, when I asked him to clarify the discrepancy between his dates for the Dos Passos/Cendrars meeting and those of Miriam Cendrars, replied “What can I say? I’m right?” (email exchange of October 27, 2017)

vous vous en doutez, je suis en train de terminer un livre. Quel sale métier nous faisons tous les deux! Heureusement qu'il y a auprès de vous un contrebandier et devant ma porte une auto qui me permet de filer de temps en temps à des centaines de kilomètres pour aller boire dans les vignobles. Je viens de faire les vendanges de Toulon jusqu'ici! C'est ça qui est vrai et bien meilleur que l'encre d'imprimerie. Malheureusement, c'est l'encre qui nous possède et qui nous gagne! Enfin, un jour, on n'écrira plus, non pas parce que nous n'en aurons plus envie, mais parce que l'on ne voudra plus de nous ou parce qu'il aura des machines pour penser, ce jour-là, je redeviendrai un vagabond, un vrai. Et vous?

Ma main amie,

Blaise Cendrars

(Dos Passos Papers, MS)

After Paris, Cendrars and Dos Passos spent a week together in Monpazier, “one of only two or three meetings between the authors,” and that week “became the nexus for a series of exchanges between them, in particular an exchange of translations” (“Translating,” Bochner 325). Cendrars had come to Monpazier to research his book on local son Jean Galmot, who had traveled to Guyana in 1906 with the deed to a gold mine, then turned his attention to the manufacture of rum, and in the process was elected deputy of the colony, was removed from office on spurious corruption charges, and became a

social crusader devoted to the welfare of working Guyanese. Galmot died under mysterious circumstances in 1928, apparently poisoned to death on the orders of the powerful colonial interests against which he had aligned himself. Cendrars' book, *Rhum: L'aventure de Jean Galmot*, was published in 1930, and comprised pieces he'd first published in the weekly *Vu*.

John and Katy Dos Passos arrived in Monpazier in late January 1930. From there, he wrote a postcard to his close friend Ernest Hemingway: "Swelllest country I ever saw in France and jesus the eats . . . wild duck, hare truffles pâté de foie—swell wine à volonté and prix du repas f12 . . . Cendrars is a hell of a good guy" (*14th Chronicle* 287). Dos Passos later remembered "speeding over the narrow winding roads of the Périgord region with the one-armed Cendrars at the wheel" ("Translating," Bochner 694) and visiting the prehistoric caves at Les Eyzies (thus the mention of that place and "la corne d'aurochs" in Cendrars' *Bourlinguer* dedication). They also had long talks about literature and journalism, according to Miriam Cendrars:

Le soir, devant le feu de l'immense cheminée, ils se réchauffent avant de monter dans leurs chambres glaciales; ils parlent poésie, littérature. John Dos Passos, de dix ans plus jeune que Blaise, a marché sur ses pas: ouvrir la poésie sur l'actualité, sur le monde moderne.

Maintenant, ils discutent de journalisme, de grand reportage: c'est la direction que Blaise est en train de prendre, et il rend hommage à l'Amérique qui a inventé ce genre littéraire. Mais non, réplique Dos

Passos, ce sont les Français qui ont le premiers inspiré les Américains, par l'exemple de Victor Hugo qui, avec *Choses vues*, avec *la Mort de Balzac*, a fait entrer dans la littérature un nouveau style: le compte rendu de l'événement.

(BC 694)

For Cendrars' part, it was the meals he apparently most remembered from his time with Dos Passos in Monpazier—eight days of specially prepared meals, specifically. Speaking to Michael Manoll in 1955, he recalled truly Gargantuan menus via a classically Cendrarsian list:

Quand John s'est marié, j'étais dans le Périgord. J'étais en train de pondre mon bouquin sur Galmot. Il est venu en voyage de noces, de New York directement à Monpazier, dont Galmot était originaire. Monpazier est une petite ville historique. C'est une bastide fortifiée construite par les rois d'Angleterre. Cela date de 1426. C'est tout petit, six cent vingt-cinq habitants au maximum. Cela a le tracé d'une ville américaine. Il y a deux principales artères et toutes les transversales coupent ces deux artères principales à angle droit. On pourrait les numéroter comme en Amérique, je crois qu'il y en a vingt et un. Je logeais dans le meilleur hôtel du pays, l'Hôtel de Londres, où l'on mange divinement bien et qui est tenu par Mme. Cassagnol. Son mari est le sosie de Charlot. Mme. Cassagnol porte moustache et la culotte en ménage. Quand John Dos Passos m'a annoncé

son arrivée, j'ai dit à Mme. Cassagnol: « J'ai des amis qui arrivent directement de New York chez vous. Tâchez de vous distinguer. » Et je ne m'en suis plus occupé, pas plus du menu que de la cave. Et, durant huit jours, Mme. Cassagnol nous a fait manger de cette bonne cuisine périgourdine, dont elle établissait les menus, allant en progressant, nous faisant une surprise tous les jours: truffes, pot-au-feu à l'ail pour faire chabrot, buisson d'écrevisses, champignons à la crème, cèpes à la bordelaise, fritures, poisson de la Dordogne et de la Garonne, brochettes de petits oiseaux, bécasse à l'armagnac, gibier à plume, à poil, venaison de braconniers dont le principal fournisseur était le curé d'un village voisin, rôtis, terrine de foie gras, salades sauvages, fromages paysans, figues fourrées au miel et aux noix pilées, pruneaux d'Agen, crêpes flambées, gros rouge à volonté, une bouteille de monbazillac pour deux, café, liqueurs, le tout pour douze francs cinquante, cinquante centimes de supplément pour la surprise du huitième jour, Le huitième jour, le jour du départ du couple Dos Passos, nous avons mangé un cygne sauvage. Je ne savais même pas qu'il y eût encore des cygnes sauvages en France, même des cygnes de passage. Quel pays étonnant que le Périgord noir!

(OC 8: 636-7)

Though the meals prepared by Mme. Cassagnol were what Cendrars chose to speak about twenty-five years after the fact, might his sojourn in Monpazier with Dos Passos have had a more profound effect? Considering what both men were working on at the time,

and what Cendrars worked on later, in the 1940s, when exiled in Aix-en-Provence, it seems likely that Dos Passos' aesthetics directly impacted Cendrars' own.

Jay Bochner, in his article "Translating the Unknown Soldier: John Dos Passos and Blaise Cendrars in Monpazier," makes a convincing case that Cendrars' tetralogy would not be the masterpiece that it is without Dos Passos and his *U.S.A.* trilogy. Dos Passos was writing *The 42nd Parallel* at the same time that he was translating Cendrars' poem for his *Panama* book, and "what he praises in the poems is the program he is developing for *U.S.A.*" (Bochner 333); that fact, as well as Dos Passos' passionate published writings about Cendrars, make Cendrars' impact on Dos Passos verifiably clear. But the influence went both ways. Bochner points out that *The 42nd Parallel*, the first book in Dos Passos' trilogy, was published in the same month as his stay in Monpazier, in February 1930 (Bochner 333); letters from Cendrars to Dos Passos over the subsequent months show that he had read *The 42nd Parallel* with great interest and enthusiasm. In a letter from Hyères dated 18 July 1930, Cendrars wrote Dos Passos:

Mon cher John Dos Passos,

Vous ne pouvez-vous imaginer l'immense plaisir que m'a fait le réception de votre livre [*The 42nd Parallel*]. J'ai immédiatement tout plaqué pour le livre. Je le trouve absolument épatant et comme il tombe bien, en plein discussion publique, à cause des livres de Morand et de Duhamel, sur les mérites de la civilisation USA. On ne peut ouvrir un journal sans tomber sur des colonnes de conneries. Vous savez ce que c'est: France 1 bon point; USA 1 mauvais; parallèle entre culture français et civilisation

américaine, à moins qu'il ne s'agisse de civilisation française et de culture américaine. Bref, toutes les idioties en faisceau. Vous devriez dire à votre éditeur français de sortir immédiatement une traduction de votre livre, car vous montrez justement, vous, que les hommes se différencient le plus dans ce qui fait leur ressemblance. Comment on fait l'amour, comment on gagne sa vie, comment s'emmerde, etc. etc. et c'est ça qui compte, en France comme en Amérique. Maintenant, qu'on s'emmerde dans un gratte-ciel ou dans un taxi place de la Concorde, ce n'est qu'un décor pour drapeaux. J'aime beaucoup les NEWSREEL qui donnent le là et le CAMERA EYE qui est une espèce de réaction chimique, d'expérimentation mystérieuse, d'échantillonnage prélevé de l'auteur. Que dit-on de votre livre chez-vous? Vous en avez de la chance de pouvoir écrire votre langue sans en référer à une Académie, et ce que j'admire le plus c'est votre vocabulaire si extraordinairement vivant.

Je ne sais pas ce qu'est devenu le dromadaire de Monpazier.; aux dernières nouvelles il s'était transformé en un loup-garou. Il paraît que plus de cent chasseurs sont l'affût et qu'aucun d'eux n'a pas "l'avoir."⁸

⁸ The "dromadaire de Monpazier" is an interesting and amusing side note. According to Jay Bochner, in an email sent to me on October 28, 2017, the camel had escaped from a traveling circus and was seen wandering in the area of Monpazier (including, apparently, by Cendrars and Dos Passos), until it was captured by hunters. By October 1930, the animal had been captured; Cendrars writes Dos Passos on the 19th of that month that "J'ai retrouvé le dromadaire chez un paysan, travaillant dur, attelé à une charrue!" (Dos Passos Papers, MS).

Mon bon souvenir à votre femme, à vous.

ma main amie

Blaise Cendrars

(Dos Passos Papers, MS)

The books by Morand and Duhamel to which Cendrars refers are *New York* (Flammarion, 1930) and *Scènes de la vie future* (Mercure de France, 1930), respectively, the latter of which was translated into English the year after its original publication under the title *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future* (Houghton Mifflin, 1931). They each sparked, or perhaps simply traded upon, an ongoing debate in France about the relative merits of French and American culture. Cendrars thinks it crucial that Dos Passos find a French translator for *The 42nd Parallel* as soon as possible, so that the debate won't go without an astute response (of a sort) from an American. On the 23rd of September 1930, he wrote Dos Passos to say that he intended to court Gaston Gallimard for a possible French version of the book: "Je rentre dans quelques jours à Paris et j'irai voir Gallimard (qui n'est pas un ami) pour lui demander ce qu'il attend pour publier le 42^o en français" (Dos Passos Papers, MS). Gallimard passed, and before long the novel was in the hands of Au Sans Pareil, the house that was also Cendrars' own publisher at the time. Soon, Cendrars was himself assisting with the translation; though he was too occupied with his own work to undertake the full task himself, he did offer to check and proofread the work already underway, as he wrote to Dos Passos on November 24, 1930:

“Naturellement, pour la traduction du 42^oP j’aurai le bonhomme à l’œil et corrigerai, personnellement, tout comme si c’était un livre à moi. Vous pouvez dormir sur vos deux oreilles, ça sera bien fait” (Dos Passos Papers, MS). Though a crucial part of the correspondence is missing, it can be inferred from what’s available that the initial Au Sans Pareil translation was deemed subpar by both Dos Passos and Cendrars. In a letter from Dos Passos to Cendrars sent from Provincetown, Massachusetts on February 5, 1931, Dos Passos urges Cendrars to not “waste too much time on it” and also, crucially, approves of the French term “Actualités” for the English term “Newsreel”, “Newsreels” being recurrent, intercut sections of Dos Passos’ novel for which Cendrars had previously expressed admiration (quoted in Bochner 337). Why is the translation of “Newsreel” as “Actualités” important? ““Actualités’ is about as cendrarsian a word as one can find,” according to Bochner, and

What can be inferred from the use of this term is that to the degree that Cendrars is in the charge of the work, what he is doing is to translate not so much into French as into Cendrars. He is not a translator to erase his own presence in any circumstances, but here the case is more complex, as he himself provides one of the underlying layers in the text. The poem *Le Panama* passes into Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.*, then re-crosses the language frontier in this new shape, with voluminous accretions, to regain its original, if veiled signature.

(“Translating” 337)

Thus, Dos Passos translates Cendrars into English and that translation work informs his own writing of *The 42nd Parallel*, then Cendrars translates Dos Passos' novel, written under the spell of Cendrars, into French.

The story of the translation of *The 42nd Parallel* into French is complex, but in the end the Au Sans Pareil translation was jettisoned (Cendrars also left that publishing house, likely as a result of their falling out over the handling of Dos Passos' novel) and Cendrars arranged for Grasset to publish the book (as well as *1919*, the second volume of *U.S.A.*), which they did in 1933. Even at this stage, Cendrars was offering his help in checking, proofing, and advising, writing Dos Passos on May 20, 1931:

Mettez-vous en rapport avec lui [Guterman, Grasset's translator], surtout pour les Newsreels et dites-lui que je me mets à sa disposition pour revoir, s'il le désire, sa traduction avec lui, surtout les passages où vous désirez voir introduire de l'argot ou une façon plus populaire de parler. Et de toute façon n'hésitez pas à avoir recours à moi si je puis vous être utile en quoique ce soit dans cette affaire.

In the closing paragraph of the same letter, Cendrars confides in Dos Passos concerning something he's been struggling with, a sort of writer's block, or an even more general malaise:

Les grands écrivains du jour ne produisent que des chefs-d'œuvre ce qui est bien moche est ennuyeux. Tous seront bientôt de l'Académie. Alors, je

ne travaille pas, disant à tout le monde que j'ai été malade, que je suis encore trop fatigué, etc. etc. et pendant ce temps j'écoute la pluie, ce qui est une façon comme une autre de progresser. Entre nous, la santé est de nouveau bonne et un de ces quatre matins je me remettrai au boulot.

Ma main amie et la patte de Volga⁹ à vous deux

Blaise Cendrars

(Dos Passos Papers, MS)

What was Cendrars working on that was causing him such struggles? It was a book called *La vie et la mort du Soldat inconnu*, a book Cendrars began in the late 1920s but never quite finished. It was eventually published, in its incomplete form, with copious annotations by Judith Trachsel, by Champion in Paris in 1995. What struggle prevented Cendrars from completing this book and caused him to blame the its delay on sickness and fatigue, and prefer to spend his time listening to the rain? Jay Bochner, referring to the work of Cendrars scholar Claude Leroy, believes he was facing an aesthetic crisis:

Claude Leroy, certainly our expert of Cendrars' unpublished and even unwritten works, has looked further into the author's psychological make-up to find that the novel had been the "victim of an aporia of writing" (*Soldat* 21), that Cendrars had been, as it were, emptied of his ability to

⁹ Volga was Cendrars' beloved dog, whom Dos Passos mentions above.

write. The primary cause of this aporia was the incompatibility, for the writer that Cendrars was in 1930, of three different “adventures” of discourses: writing in history, writing in myth, and writing in autobiography (*Soldat* 21). In the tetralogy to come, Cendrars would certainly put these back together, in his own remarkable manner (in any case, Leroy is certainly reading back from the success of the tetralogy), but in 1930, he was as yet unable to do so. The problem was surely magnified by Dos Passos’ spectacular success at precisely this synthesis of parallel but disparate discourses. Finally, in Leroy’s argument, Cendrars had run into a wall with his unknown soldier where “he had, as it were, [chosen] the wrong unknown man” (*Soldat* 22). The unknown subject in search of Cendrars the author was not the bodiless soldier but his own scattered self, awaiting form in language. Having left his own right arm on the battlefield, Cendrars was not just struggling with metaphors.

(“Translating” 341)

Bochner’s argument is that when Cendrars did “put these back together” in the tetralogy, he did so in part by following lessons he had learned from Dos Passos. The two writers had already discussed the origins of reportage as a worthy literary form during their time together in Monpazier, with Cendrars first asserting that literary reportage was an American phenomenon and Dos Passos countering with the example of Victor Hugo’s *Choses vues* and *Le mort de Balzac*, and in *U.S.A.* and other books Dos Passos had gone

far in combining so-called high and low writing, blending literature with reportage, and assembling diverse sources and found materials for his work. “When he reaches his stride in *U.S.A.*,” Bochner writes, “he finds that he is writing neither novels nor reportage but ‘chronicles’ . . . One of the first questions it was about to answer was whether one could produce a serious, pondered mode of writing—let us call it literary—which would also be an authentic witness and participant in a sensational Modernism” (330). In 1930, when Cendrars was stuck on a tale he wasn’t sure how to tell, Dos Passos was successfully integrating the historical, the mythological, and the autobiographical, along with diverse other elements and narrative modes, and producing his “chronicles” of *U.S.A.* Though Dos Passos surely produced his writing of this era under the influence of Cendrars, in particular of Cendrars’ poetry, he was also doing something Cendrars was as yet unable to do:

But while noting Cendrars’ influence, it is important to stress here the shock of a different recognition; Dos Passos had brought all these modes together, on a much larger scale (and without the help of Sonia Delaunay’s parallel painting), on the scale of some fifteen hundred pages in fact, and under the banner of a new concept, the chronicle. While Dos Passos may owe some of the avant-garde elements of the chronicle to the Cendrars of *Kodak*, Cendrars himself, at the time of writing *Rhum*, had not yet seen how to integrate his modernities into a chronicle of his own . . . the

American's success at turning that sort of long, document-laden job into a modern narrative art on a grand scale must impress him greatly.

(“Translating” 336)

What Cendrars ends up doing in his tetralogy is very much in keeping with Dos Passos' efforts in *U.S.A.*, though more in the sense of form and aim than in content. When Cendrars writes the four great books published at the end of and shortly after the Second World War, he is solitary and exiled—by decree more than by choice—and the result is writing that is deeply, profoundly inward-looking, less a chronicle of the life of a nation (as in Dos Passos) than one of the life of a man. Nevertheless, his own well of memory serves as a jumping-off point for some of the most brilliant and wide-ranging explorations in modern literature, tackling subjects far too diverse to list here. Yet those diverse subjects and characters are all filtered through the mind of the author, Blaise Cendrars, sitting alone at his typewriter, in a dingy apartment in Aix-en-Provence, for perhaps the first time in his life having nowhere to go and no one to see. It was then, and under those conditions, that the lessons he'd learned from John Dos Passos some dozen years before truly bore fruit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HENRY MILLER: “UN ÉCRIVAIN AMÉRICAIN NOUS EST NÉ”

American writer Henry Miller (1891-1980) first visited Paris in the summer 1928, accompanied by his second wife, June, but returned to his native New York City in January 1929. By March 4, 1930, he was back in Paris, without June this time, and he would live there, making occasional trips back to the United States, until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. It was in Paris that he wrote and published the book that made his literary reputation, *Tropic of Cancer* (Obelisk Press, 1934), which was published on September 1, which by coincidence was also Blaise Cendrars' birthday. From his residence at 18 Villa Seurat, in the 14th arrondissement, Miller sent out copies of his newly-published book to every prominent writer and reviewer he could, including Sherwood Anderson, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, T.S. Eliot, Havelock Ellis, Emma Goldman, Aldous Huxley, H.L. Mencken, Ezra Pound, and last but far from least, Blaise Cendrars (Ferguson 239). When sending the book to Cendrars, Miller included a letter. Dated 26 November 1934, it reads:

Dear Mr. Cendrars,

I'm sending you in the same mail a copy of my book, *Tropic of Cancer*—to the address given me by Mr. Bradley. Please consider it as a slight recompense for the great pleasure I have had in reading your books.

Particularly do I recall *Moravagine* which was one of the first French books I read upon arriving here some years ago. You will find a slight reference to it somewhere in my book.

If you have the time, when you pass through Paris again, I wish you would look me up. I should be glad to shake hands with you.

Sincerely yours,

Henry V. Miller

(*Correspondances* 358)¹⁰

The “slight reference” to Cendrars’ *Moravagine* in *Tropic of Cancer* to which Miller refers is this: “I love the great rivers like the Amazon and the Orinoco, where crazy men like Moravagine float on through dream and legend in an open boat and drown in the blind mouths of the river” (232). But Jay Bochner contends, in his article “An American Writer Born in Paris,” that Cendrars is all over *Tropic of Cancer*, and not only in this one sentence, and I concur: “We begin to better understand the ‘somewhere’ invoked in Miller’s first letter . . . Cendrars isn’t in a single, particular place, but rather permeates the book” (109).

Miller wrote hundreds of letters and gave away dozens of copies of the book, visiting various Parisian bookshops and urging them to stock it. Though the response to his efforts was decidedly mixed, his persistence did pay off in terms of creating what now

¹⁰ Miller most often wrote to Cendrars in French, but occasionally wrote him in English. I will be faithful to the language of the original when quoting from Miller’s letters.

we might call “buzz,” and “within a year of its publication [*Tropic of Cancer*] had acquired a solid reputation as an underground classic” (Ferguson 240). Miller biographer Robert Ferguson fails to mention what seems to me to be a crucial fact: of all the publicity and copies of the book Miller sent out, only one recipient took notice enough to actually write and publish a response.

That recipient was Blaise Cendrars, who published the first-ever review of *Tropic of Cancer*. Titled “Un écrivain américain nous est né,” the review was published in the summer 1935 issue of *Orbes*, a short-lived but influential magazine of arts and letters produced by Au Sans Pareil, a Parisian venture which between 1919 and 1936 created fine editions of works by André Breton, Lautréamont, Max Ernst, and others. Besides work by Cendrars, *Orbes* itself featured pieces by Francis Picabia, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie, Pierre Reverdy, Le Douanier Henri Rousseau, Fernand Léger, Tristan Tzara, Jean Arp, and Phillippe Soupault.

Cendrars’ review of *Tropic of Cancer* is short enough (and important enough) to justify reproducing it here in its entirety:

Un écrivain américain nous est né. Henry Miller qui vient d’écrire son premier livre, qui vient de publier son premier livre à Paris. Livre royal, livre atroce, exactement le genre de livres que j’aime le plus. Le livre d’un étranger qui débarque à Paris, qui s’y perd, qui perd pied; un Américain qui fait des plongeurs dans les bas-fonds, qui se raccroche à des putains, à des ivrognes dans tous les quartiers, un inconnu qui recherche et qui fuit les noctambules de Montparnasse et de Montmartre, qui écoute leurs histoires et qui leur en conte, et qui se sauve,

chancelant; un homme souvent ivre, oui, mais plus souvent encore en proie au vertige de la faim, car ce vagabond erre durant six ans, tourne en rond durant six ans dans les rues de la capitale comme un pauvre saint Labre dans la Rome du XVIII^e siècle.

Mais comme cet étranger qui erre dans Paris n'est pas un mystique, ni le pauvre fiévreux et halluciné des *Soliloques* de Jehan Rictus, ni un Slave esthétisant dans le genre de Malte Laurids Brigge du défunt Rainer Maria Rilke, ni même, bien que nordique, un protestant scientifique comme Strindberg que la solitude et la misère à Paris poussaient aux épouvantements et rendaient fou, en solide réaliste qu'il est notre Américain, même quand il a le vertige sait que cela lui vient de la faim.

Alors en découvrant Paris, en respirant Paris, en dévorant Paris, il en avale, furieux, et il en mange, vomit, compisse la ville, l'adore et la maudit jusqu'au jour où il sent obscurément qu'il fait lui-même partie du peuple extraordinaire des rues de cette grande ville, que Paris l'a compénétré et que dorénavant il ne pourra jamais plus vivre ailleurs.

Avec stupeur il se met alors à écrire ce qui lui est arrivé, et bien qu'écrit en anglais et que l'auteur soit un Américain 100 pour 100, ce livre par sa façon d'exposer les êtres et les choses, et de dire crûment leur fait aux gens (comme Mirabeau *not ad usum Delphini!*), ce livre est profondément de chez nous, et

Henry Miller, un des nôtres, d'esprit, d'écriture, de puissance et de don, un écrivain universel comme tous ceux qui ont su exprimer dans un livre une vision personnelle de Paris.

Je me devais de vous saluer, mon cher Henry Miller, car moi aussi j'ai erré pauvre et transi dans les rues hostiles d'une grande ville à l'étranger où je ne connaissais pas âme qui vive, et où j'ai écrit mon premier livre, c'était dans votre vieux New York, mon vieux . . . mais ceci est une autre histoire.

1er janvier 1935, Blaise Cendrars.

(Correspondance 73-4)

The publication of "Un écrivain américain nous est né" must have been one of the high points of Henry Miller's long life. But even prior to Cendrars writing the piece, he and Miller had met in person. On the 14th of December 1934, Cendrars knocked on the door of Miller's apartment at 18 villa Seurat at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Miller and his friend Alfred (Fred) Perlès were there. Perlès later remembered the occasion thus:

Un jour où les fonds étaient bas et où nous nous demandions comment nous allions manger, un manchot fit son entrée dans l'atelier. C'était Blaise Cendrars. Il était fort comme un Turc, ses yeux étaient d'un bleu brillant, la peau tannée par la vie au grand air. Il avait plus l'air d'un marin

que d'un écrivain, mieux encore l'air d'un pirate qui vient de recevoir sa part de butin et qui s'apprête à mettre la ville à feu et à sang.

(*Correspondance* 21)

The trio ventured out, Cendrars hailing a taxi and assuring the impoverished pair that the evening would be on him. They went to Montmartre, to the Restaurant des Fleurs, rue des Abbesses, and drank, ate, and talked. At two in the morning, back at Villa Seurat, an overjoyed and exhausted Miller wrote to Anaïs Nin:

Cendrars came at 3 p.m. and I have just gotten away from him, had to run away. As a man I must have disappointed him. I was almost taciturn. And yet, what a day! What a night! I received the most magnificent homage I have yet received from another man—from a writer, that is. Fred was here. Fred is still with him. I ducked on the pretense of having work to do. It wasn't very chic on my part. I won't now give you the details of our meeting. It's too vast. It was epic. (All in French, by the way, because he refuses to speak English par principe.) I feel battered now. And soaked with *finés* and liqueurs and good wines. I had thirty francs in my pocket. When it came time to eat he was still talking—and he is the greatest storyteller I have ever listened to! (A cross between Jack London and Knut Hamsun—he knew these two when they were fairly unknown) . . . [we went] to Montmartre, the rue des Abbesses, Restaurant des Fleurs. What a

place! The first time in my life I have seen so many beautiful Frenchwomen. He said we would eat cheaply and I thought we would go Dutch. Then he began ordering. Asked me did I like to eat. Why certainly! Alors, lobster, oysters, pigeons, desserts I never saw in my life, wines extraordinary, *fines*, Chartreuse, coffee etc. etc. I was embarrassed as all hell. 30 frs. Mortified. A friend blows in. Cendrars looks rough, like a sailor—he is one at bottom—and he speaks rather loudly, but very well. Has only one arm, the empty one, or half-arm slung affectionately around my neck while he tells the whole restaurant what a great guy I am, what the book is about, why it must be published in French, where I belong in the great Catholic tradition, etc. etc. etc. Perhaps the finest moment in my life, in one sense. But it went flat. I had nothing to say. I wondered how long it would continue. I was a perfect ass. And trying at intervals to break away. Finally we go out, four of us now, and we must have some more alcohol in the bars along the Boulevard in Montmartre. Whores hanging on to us, and Cendrars hugging them like a sailor, and urging me to take one, take two, take as many as you want. After two or three of these bars and more whores hanging on our necks I ducked—very unceremoniously too. An au revoir. I don't know what he must think of me.

In the afternoon he spoke at great length about what was to be done. If it weren't that he was leaving for Brazil in January he said he would have undertaken to translate the book himself. But, he will do this he says—that

is, he said this earlier in the day, and again at the table. He would speak to the head man at Grasset, who is a friend. (It was through Cendrars that Dos Passos was translated.) He said he would try to sell them the idea by talking first about my [D.H.] Lawrence book—because Grasset wants a good book on Lawrence! Then he would wind them up about the *Tropic of Cancer*. He would try to select the translator. Said it required the most tactful translation. He repeated constantly that I was in the best tradition, stemmed from Rabelais, had guts, etc. (He said really marvelous things which it is too bad I haven't time to give you.) Said there would have to be severe cuts, and the spirit would have to be rendered by one capable of understanding me. Said it would probably not have a big audience, but the best in France. (What I liked principally in all he said was his realization that I knew the streets intimately. Said he had never read a book by an American, or any foreigner, that could compare with it in this respect.) No *chique*. Said he walks the streets from morning to night, hates to write, but quand même he is a big worker, a formidable one. He's a real man, I tell you. Perhaps he is that one man I wrote about recently, the man I expected to come forward and hail me.

(Miller, *Letters* 142-4)

Miller was chagrined that he had not stuck things out to the end of the night with Cendrars and Perlès, but instead had begged off and gone home ahead of them. No doubt he was overawed in the presence of Cendrars, who was fast becoming one of his literary

idols. Ordinarily prolix, Miller found himself relatively tongue-tied. On Christmas Day, 1934, he wrote Cendrars a letter of apology and explanation, a missive that for Cendrars was, most likely, unnecessary:

Dear Mr. Cendrars,

I must beg you to forgive me for not getting in touch with you before this.

The truth is, I haven't been able to write you—I am in a terribly despondent mood. Can't break it. When it lifts I'll call you up. I can't possibly talk to you when I feel this way. So please don't think that I have been indifferent, unresponsive. Nothing has pleased me so much in years as your visit. I feel deeply indebted to you.

Sometimes life gets you by the throat and strangles you. That's how it is with me now. This is the worst, the lousiest Christmas I have ever seen in my whole life. No discouragement, they say. Bien!

Cordially yours, Henry V. Miller

(Correspondance 358-9)

The specific cause of Miller's low mood was his divorce from his wife June, which had been finalized five days prior. By the time he next wrote Cendrars, on January 12, 1935, he was in New York, where Anaïs Nin awaited him. These letters of December 1934 and January 1935 establish a pattern to the relationship between Miller and Cendrars that

would continue until the latter's death in 1961: Miller would write Cendrars often, and his letters would be soul-baring, whereas Cendrars would write Miller far less frequently, and would be for the most part matter-of-fact. Though Cendrars was only four years older than Miller, who was born in 1891, the dynamic of their relationship was always elder to junior, master to novice, one-who-had arrived to one-as-yet-to arrive. Jay Bochner has written that "there is an imbalance in these exchanges. Miller writes voluminously and often; Cendrars, known as an overwhelming conversationalist, writes infrequently and tersely. Miller runs on, elaborates, makes everything more than explicit; Cendrars' few words are blunt and to the point, with depths behind their restraint, or their impatience" ("An American Writer Born," 104). Miller seems to feel he owes Cendrars a debt, likely for the *Orbes* review, "one that he does not seem to be able to discharge but only acknowledge, over these many years; he is always searching to please, for example to obtain an American publisher for his French friend" (Bochner 104). In fact, "the whole story of *Tropic of Cancer* is one of the essentially passive Miller attaching himself to whoever will have him" (Bochner 109).

The importance of Cendrars to Miller, and particularly of how important Cendrars' review of *Tropic of Cancer* was to Miller, is quite clear throughout their twenty-five-year-long exchange of letters; the relatively less important place Miller held for Cendrars' is best indicated by an exchange he had with his good friend Jacques-Henry Lévesque in 1948. On April 23, 1948, Cendrars wrote Lévesque:

Mon cher Jacques,

Page 100 de votre livre, en note, vous parlez du premier article sur Henry Miller publié dans *Orbes*. Je ne m'en souviens pas du tout! Si vous avez sous la main, envoyez-le-moi, S.V.P. Je serais curieux de lire. Ma main amie

Blaise

(Chefdor, "*J'écris*" 496)

Then, on May 5, Cendrars wrote Lévesque again:

Mon cher Jacques,

Je vous remercie beaucoup de m'avoir envoyé le n° d'*Orbes*. J'avais absolument oublié ces textes, qui ne sont pas mal du tout et qui m'ont fait plaisir, surtout celui sur Miller! C'est curieux je ne m'en souvenais pas, curieux aussi que personne ne s'en soit souvenu et ne l'ait cité, pas même son éditeur! Quand Miller a été soudain porté au pinacle et est devenu à la mode. Cela me laisse rêveur. . .

Ma main amie

Blaise

(Chefdor, "*J'écris*" 496)

Once back in Paris, in February 1935, Miller wrote Cendrars again, to thank him for the review of *Tropic of Cancer* published in *Orbes* and to share his impressions of New York, the experience of returning there as an exile, and the joy he felt upon returning to France:

My dear Cendrars,

It was [with] very great pleasure that I read the review of my book which you wrote for *Orbes*. I have been back only a few days and the revue was discovered quite by accident, through a friend of mine. So far as I know this is the only review of the book which has yet appeared. That it should be in French, and from your hand, makes it doubly precious to me. I was impressed, touched, by the warm, human quality of it—as I was the day we met.

(*Correspondances* 361)

Miller then informs him about the first of many attempts to interest American editors and publishers in Cendrars' work:

Also let me add that while in New York I wrote a long letter about you to the editor of *Esquire*, hoping that he would offer you a commission to write for the magazine, but received absolutely no response, not even an

acknowledgement of my letter. As a matter of fact, said editor, in returning my manuscripts, went out of his way to insult me! Very American! All exiles, voluntary or involuntary, are taboo to the American public. Even the celebrated Hemingway is on the decline—and he is weeping about it, poor stiff.

(*Correspondances* 362)

At the end of the letter he references the conclusion of Cendrars' review, demonstrating that he had not yet read the work to which Cendrars was referring, *Les Pâques à New-York*:

Towards the close of your review you mentioned so sympathetically the birth of your first book—in New York. My dear Cendrars, I would like dearly to know that book. Which one is it? I must read it very soon. And you will forgive me—I know it sounds sentimental—for expressing an extra bit of appreciation for that opening line of your review: *Un écrivain américain nous est né*. I hope to live up to that always.

Cordially yours,

Henry Miller

(*Correspondances* 362-3)

This letter was sent from 18 villa Seurat, where Miller was once again living after his return from New York. The address housed a shifting group of writers and artists, including at various times Anaïs Nin, the astrologer Conrad Moricand (who had known Cendrars since before 1917, and who illustrated the writer's 1931 essay collection *Aujourd'hui*), Raymond Queneau, Alfred Perlès, the painters Hans Reichel and Abraham Rattner and the photographer Brassai.

During these years, Cendrars was often away from Paris for months at a time, traveling in South America and elsewhere, including in the United States. It is unlikely that he and Miller met in person, though Miller did continue to write him and to read his books. Just before leaving Paris for Greece in late 1938, Miller wrote Cendrars. His letter of November 30, 1938 would be the last one until after the Second World War, although according to Jay Bochner the two did meet by chance in the street just prior to Miller's departure for the United States, in June 1939 (*Correspondance* 79). Miller's letter of November 30 reads, in part:

Quand je parle de vous je me déraille. Je vois tellement de choses dans vos livres. Et cette histoire « J'ai saigné » est inoubliable pour moi. Pour la première fois de ma vie j'étais effrayé par les paroles! Et combien je vous comprends—et cette histoire même—quand vous dites quelque part l'intervalle entre l'expérience et le récit est au moins dix ans. Il n'a pu être autrement—pour ceux qui racontent une vie comme la vôtre. Chaque fois que je termine un livre de vous je dis la même chose— « Le plus humain

de tous les écrivains que je connais! » C'est pourquoi je vous écris parfois idiotement peut-être.

(*Correspondances* 78)

Miller clearly had some awareness of his role relative to Cendrars. He seemed content with the posture of the student since he did, after all, idolize Cendrars. On numerous occasions in his fiction and correspondence, he described himself as a coward, and Cendrars seemed to him to be a paragon not only of the writer's art but also of manly, courageous virtues.

For his part, Cendrars admired at least some of Miller's writing, and considered him an entertaining companion. In 1956, in the review *Arts et Spectacles*, he published "Vingt Ans Plus Tard," a reminiscence of a dinner he and Miller shared in 1935. Curiously, Henry Miller does not reference the event in his correspondence with Cendrars, perhaps because the poverty and hunger Cendrars describes is somewhat less than flattering (though Cendrars relates the story with obvious admiration). Cendrars recalls that:

C'était en 1935. Je sortais d'un petit restaurant situé du côté du Mont-Thabor [here Cendrars refers to the Paris street, not the actual mountain in the Alps] . . . lorsque je me heurte à Miller. Pas rasé, triste figure, les souliers traînant sur le trottoir, le gars n'avait pas l'air fier. Ça ne va pas,

lui demandai-je? En effet, cela n'allait pas. Il n'avait pas mangé depuis deux ou trois jours. Il ne savait plus bien.

Dans ces cas-là, les bonnes paroles ne servent à rien. Je pris donc Miller par les bras et m'en retournai au bistro. Je demandai au patron de nous amener un litre et une « cuvette », ce qu'il fit. Alors j'assisté à un exploit que je ne croyais pas possible. Méthodiquement, comme une machine à mastiquer, tranche après tranche, Miller a mangé toute la cuvette de pâté, peut-être quatre kilos. Il a dû prendre en même temps quatre ou cinq litres d'Anjou. Il avait à l'époque cet estomac merveilleux du crève-la-faim capable de se lester pour une semaine et de jeûner ensuite autant. C'était un gars.

Il m'a raconté que le premier livre en français qu'il avait lu en arrivant était: *Moravagine*. Il s'était installé dans un petit tabac de la rue Edgar-Quinet. C'est un peu idiot à dire, mais chaque fois que je passe devant, j'y entre.

...

Je crois que Miller est le premier écrivain américain à avoir découvert une mine d'or en Europe. Comme il me l'a dit: « Il y a encore des gens honnêtes. Cela fait tout de même plaisir. »

(*Correspondances* 80-1)

This encounter with Miller stuck in Cendrars' mind—he still remembered Miller's voracious appetite over twenty years later—but documented, in-person encounters between the two were rare.

Miller left Paris in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. He traveled to Greece, where he visited his friends Lawrence and Nancy Durrell on Corfu and gathered the material for what would become by many accounts his finest book, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), and then back to the United States, where by 1944 he had settled in Big Sur, California. In a letter sent to his and Cendrars' mutual friend Guy Tosi, dated 28 March 1947, Miller wrote that Cendrars “was the last man I saw as I was leaving Paris in June 1939” (*Correspondances* 364).

The correspondence between Miller and Cendrars breaks off in late 1938 and does not resume until 1947. The war years were a period of great silence for Cendrars, and he spent most of them in a sort of internal exile in Aix-en-Provence. When he emerged from this silence, it was with a magnificent tetralogy that is the crowning achievement of his literary career: the difficult-to-classify books *L'homme foudroyé* (1945), *La main coupée* (1946), *Bourlinguer* (1948), and *Le Lotissement du ciel* (1949). One chapter of *Bourlinguer*, titled “Rotterdam: La grande rixe,” is dedicated to Henry Miller. Cendrars writes:

A

HENRY MILLER

En souvenir de la dèche qu'il battait à Paris quand je l'ai connu, au début du deuxième tiers du XX^e siècle, et pour lui rappeler l'enfer grouillant

d'une capitale et ses bas-fonds, dans le désert de Big Sur, Californie (U.S.A.), où il se tient confiné depuis son retour de Grèce en 1940, désert aussi affreux et minéralisé que celui de Nitrie, en Égypte, où les Pères ont inauguré la vie d'anachorète, au IV^e siècle, pour tenter « l'escalade de Dieu », conduits par SAINT ANTOINE, en l'an 340, à Pispir, lequel solitaire s'écriait dans sa prière: « O SOLEIL, POURQUOI ME TROUBLES-TU? »

Avec ma main amie,

BLAISE CENDRARS

(OC 6: 208)

The dedication is typical Cendrars, heartfelt and erudite and somewhat hermetic. One doubts that Miller thought of himself as an anchorite at Big Sur, and one knows that Big Sur is neither a desert nor dreadful. Strangely, since he frequently seemed to be courting Cendrars' favor, Miller's response to the dedication was understated: "Merci pour cette dédicace sur « la rixe » que j'ai lu dans une revue illustré il y a quelques mois . . . Je n'ai encore plongé dans votre gros livre. Je reprends mon souffle d'abord!" (*Correspondances* 130-1).

From 1947 onwards, Cendrars wrote Miller more often than he had previously, and frequently sent him books and other gifts. In the 1930s, he had traveled too much and otherwise been too preoccupied to stay in close contact with Miller, and in the war years communication was impossible, especially from occupied France to the United States. For his part, Miller continued his efforts to entice American publishers to reprint

Cendrars' books in the United States, in English-language versions. He met with little success. Cendrars seemed unperturbed. On 28 March 1948, he wrote Miller from Villefranche-sur-Mer: "Vous êtes bien gentil de relancer les éditeurs américains-ricains. Tout cela se fera un jour, on ne saura ni comment ni pourquoi" (*Correspondances* 112).

When Miller failed to attract interest in Cendrars from American publishers, he did what was perhaps the next best thing: he wrote about Cendrars himself, and used his pull with his own publisher, New Directions, to include those pieces in two of his essay collections. The earlier of the two essays, "Tribute to Blaise Cendrars," was first published in 1938 in a Shanghai magazine, *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, but became more widely available when it was reprinted in Miller's 1941 book *The Wisdom of the Heart*. In the piece, Miller gives full voice to the abiding love he has for Cendrars the writer and Cendrars the man:

The reason I always think of Cendrars with affection and admiration is that he resembles so closely that Chinese rock-bottom man of my imagination whom I have probably invented because of my hatred and contempt for the men I see about me in the world today. Cendrars himself gives the clue to his enigmatic character in an autobiographical fragment, a little book called *Une Nuit dans la Forêt*. "De plus en plus, je me rends compte que j'ai toujours pratiqué la vie contemplative."

Turbulent and chaotic though his writing seems, the meaning nevertheless is always crystal clear. Cendrars anchors himself in the very heart of

things. He is the most active of men and yet serene as a lama . . . Many people would say that he is generous to a fault. I would not use the word generous in connection with Cendrars. He is beyond that. He is a vital force, a blind and pitiless urge, closer to nature than to man. He is tender and ruthless at the same time. He is antinomian. And always uniquely himself, always uniquely Blaise Cendrars.

. . .

He is the most contemporary of contemporaries, dated and undated at the same time . . . He can tell the most monstrous lies and remain absolutely truthful . . . Cendrars knows only the reality and honesty of the heart . . . If sometimes he seems like a charge of dynamite it is because his sincerity, his integrity, is incorruptible . . . There is hardly a corner of the globe where he has not set foot. He has not only voyaged about the world, but beyond the world . . . The world is one, the same in dream as in waking life. One plasma and one magma. Frontiers exist only for the timid ones, for the poor and mean at heart. Cendrars never uses the word “frontier”: he speaks of latitude and longitude . . . he is the most marvelous talker I have ever listened to. His talk is not of loneliness, as with most men—it is of the absolute moment, of nothingness, of evanescence and metamorphosis. And so it is fecund, magical, toxic . . . he is never lost, nor is he ever deceived. Nor does he ever leave his body, as do those strange seekers of wisdom in Tibet. Wherever Cendrars goes his body accompanies him—and his hunger and his thirst . . . His talk is that of a man ceaselessly

emptying his pockets. He does not talk words; he talks things, facts, deeds, experiences.

. . .

I remember reading *Moravagine*, one of my very first attempts to read French. It was like reading a phosphorescent text through smoked glasses. I had to divine what he was saying, Cendrars, but I got it . . . Everything is written in blood, but blood that is saturated with starlight. Cendrars is like a transparent fish swimming in a planetary sperm; you can see his backbone, his lungs, his heart, his kidneys, his intestines; you can see the red corpuscles moving in the blood-stream. You can look clean through him and see the planets wheeling. The silence he creates is deafening. It takes you back to the beginning of the world, to that hush which is engraved on the face of mystery.

I always see him there in the hub of the universe, slowly revolving with the vortex. I see his slouch hat and battered mug beneath it. I see him “revolutionizing,” because there is no help for it, because there is nothing else to do. Yes he is a sort of Brahman *à rebours*, as he says of himself, a Brahman who is the envoy plenipotentiary of the active principle itself. He is the man of the dream which he is dreaming, and he will be that until the dream ends. There is no subject and object. *There is*. A transitive mode which is expressed by the intransitive; action which is the negation of

activity. Cendrars is the eye of the navel, the face in the mirror which remains after you have turned your back on it.

...

It is on this wheel of creation and destruction that Cendrars turns, as the globe itself turns. It is this which isolates him, makes him a solitary. He refuses to spread himself thin over an illusory pattern of grandeur; he muscles deeper and deeper into the hub, into the everlasting no-principle of the universe.

(Wisdom of the Heart 151-8)

For all of his impressionistic hyperbole—and I’ve only quoted selections from the essay here—Miller’s passion for Cendrars is genuine. Cendrars’ seeming imperturbability, which on other occasions Miller described as courage, is something Miller lacked and very much wanted. Whereas Miller fled France when war seemed certain, Cendrars tried his hardest to enter military service again—though since he was a one-armed man of fifty-two years of age, the French army of course declined. Whereas Miller’s prose was often overcooked, Cendrars’ seemed to always hit the mark (at least in Miller’s not-so-humble opinion).

Henry Miller next published an essay on Cendrars in his 1952 collection *The Books in My Life*. Titled simply “Blaise Cendrars,” this piece is cool and calm when compared to his 1938 essay, though it is no less laudatory. At the back of the book, Miller includes a list of “The Hundred Books Which Influenced Me Most.” For each writer, including Balzac, Defoe, Dostoevsky, Emerson, Hugo, Joyce, Nietzsche, Proust, Swift,

Tennyson, Thoreau, Twain, Whitman, and others, he lists the work or work he favors; for some, he lists “works in general,” but Blaise Cendrars is the only writer on the list for whom Miller lists “virtually the complete works” (327). Cendrars is also the only author, other than Miller himself, whose portrait appears in the book, in the form of a well-known photograph by Robert Doisneau:



In the piece, Miller writes:

Cendrars was the first French writer to look me up, during my stay in Paris (I lived in Paris from March 1930 to June 1939), and the last man I saw on leaving Paris. I had just a few minutes before catching the train for

Rocamadour and I was having a last drink on the terrasse of my hotel near the Porte d'Orléans when Cendrars hove in sight. Nothing could have given me greater joy than this unexpected last-minute encounter. In a few words, I told him of my intention to visit Greece. Then I sat back and drank in the music of his sonorous voice which to me always seemed to come from a sea organ. In those last few minutes Cendrars managed to convey a world of information, and with the same warmth and tenderness which he exudes in his books. Like the very ground under our feet, his thoughts were honeycombed with all manner of subterranean passages. I left him sitting there in shirt-sleeves, never dreaming that years would elapse before hearing from him again, never dreaming that I was perhaps taking my last look at Paris.

(58)

Miller explains why he's taken on the propagation of Cendrars to an English-speaking audience as a sort of personal mission. "Those who know only *Sutter's Gold*, *Panama*, and *On the Trans-siberian*, which are about all the American reader gets to know, may indeed wonder . . . why this man has not been translated more fully. Long before I attempted to make Cendrars better known to the American public (and to the world at large, I may well add), John Dos Passos had translated and illustrated with water colors *Panama, or the adventures of my seven uncles*" (59-60). Miller continued to proselytize Cendrars for the rest of his life, and became the gateway to Cendrars' work for successive generations of English-speaking readers.

He then explains, in clearer and less fanciful terms than he had in his 1938 essay, what he finds so enthralling about Blaise Cendrars:

Yes, he is an explorer and investigator of the ways and doings of men. And he has made himself such by planting himself in the midst of life, by taking up his lot with his fellow creatures. What a superb, painstaking reporter he is, this man who would scorn the thought of being called “a student of life.” He has the faculty of getting “his story” by a process of osmosis; he seems to seek nothing deliberately. Which is why, no doubt, his own story is always interwoven with the other man’s. To be sure, he possesses the art of distillation, but what he is vitally interested in is the alchemical nature of all relationships. This eternal quest of the transmutative enables him to reveal men to themselves and to the world; it causes him to extol men’s virtues, to reconcile us to their faults and weaknesses, to increase our knowledge and respect for what is essentially human, to deepen our love and understanding of the world. He is the “reporter” par excellence because he combines the faculties of poet, seer, and prophet. An innovator and initiator, ever the first to give testimony, he has made known to us the real pioneers, the real adventurers, the real discoverers among our contemporaries. More than any other writer I can think of he has made dear to us “le bel aujourd’hui.”

For Miller, who is best-known for his transparently autobiographical novels *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Nexus*, *Plexus*, and *Sexus*, the appeal of Cendrars, whose “own story is always interwoven with the other man’s,” is clear. Yet Cendrars is also, according to Miller, “a man of many parts. He is also a man of many books, many kinds of books, and by that I do not mean ‘good’ and ‘bad’ but books so different one from another that he gives the impression of evolving in all directions at once. An evolved man, truly. Certainly an evolved writer” (60). This is an important point, because only some of Cendrars’ books are patently autobiographical, most clearly and prominently the masterworks of his post-Second World War tetralogy. The rest of his body of work is so diverse, including poetry, novels, reportage, sociopolitical essays, and touches on myriad forms and genres, that his literary career on the whole is unclassifiable. To some extent, Henry Miller echoes this diversity in his own oeuvre—which includes autobiographical novels as well as a number of nonfiction collections including sociopolitical pieces, travel writing, and profiles of individuals—but Miller was never a poet, nor a soldier, nor a world traveler, at least not to the extent that Cendrars was. He never worked in film, as Cendrars did with Abel Gance and Jean Vigo. Miller himself readily acknowledged that he was, in some ways, a mere aspirant to those qualities and accomplishments he so cherished in Cendrars:

My dear Cendrars, I will never know you, not as I do other men, of that I am certain. No matter how thoroughly you reveal yourself I shall never get to the bottom of you. I doubt that anyone ever will, and it is not vanity

which prompts me to put it this way. You are as inscrutable as a Buddha.
 You inspire, you reveal, but you never give yourself wholly away.

(63)

Miller's experience of reading Cendrars was intensely personal, not a matter for the intellect so much as an affair of the heart, so much so that for all his admiration for Cendrars, Miller found it somewhat difficult to distill his feelings for the man and his work:

There were times when reading Cendrars—and this is something which happens to me rarely—that I put the book down in order to wring my hands with joy or despair, with anguish or with desperation. Cendrars has stopped me in my tracks again and again, just as implacably as a gunman pressing a rod against one's spine. Oh, yes, I am often carried away by exaltation in reading a man's work. But I am alluding now to something other than exaltation. I am talking of a sensation in which all one's emotions are blended and confused. I am talking of knockout blows.

Cendrars has knocked me cold. Not once, but a number of times. And I am not exactly a ham, when it comes to taking it on the chin! Yes, mon cher Cendrars, you not only stopped *me*, you stopped the clock. It has taken me days, weeks, sometimes months, to recover from those bouts with you. Even years later, I can put my hand to the spot where I caught the blow and feel the old smart. You battered and bruised me; you left me scarred,

dazed, punch-drunk. The curious thing is that the better I know you—through your books—the more susceptible I become. It is as if you had put the Indian sign on me. I come forward with chin outstretched— “to take it.” *I am your meat*, as I have so often said. And it is because I believe I am not unique in this, because I wish others to enjoy this uncommon experience, that I continue to put in my little word for you whenever, wherever, I can.

(63)

Miller observes the curious way in which Cendrars seems completely himself but also global and representative, writing that “you make the chair talk and the room vibrate with the tumult . . . of a whole nation whose history has become your history, whose life is your life and yours theirs . . . forming a web which the spider in you ceaselessly spins and which spreads in us . . . until the whole of creation is involved” (64). He points to Cendrars’ physiognomy, this face that “has probably been photographed more than any contemporary writer,” and notes that “sketches and portraits of him have been made by any number of celebrated artists, including Modigliani, Apollinaire, Léger” (65). He notices how Cendrars’ “expressive” left hand is featured prominently in many of the photos, the left hand with which “he has written most of his books, signed his name to innumerable letters and postcards . . . guided his speedy Alfa-Romeo through the most dangerous terrains . . . hacked his way through jungles, punched his way through brawls . . . clapped his copains on the back . . . and caressed the women and animals he has loved” (65). Miller goes on

and on describing the various phases of Cendrars' life as illustrated in portraits, then writes "I force myself to draw rein. I could go on forever about the 'physiognomic' aspects of the man. His is a mug you can never forget. It's *human*, that's what. Human like Chinese faces, like Egyptian, Cretan, Etruscan ones" (66).

Of Cendrars' writing, and the response of critics and the public to it, Miller says "many are the things that have been said against this writer . . . that his books are cinematic . . . that they are sensational, that he exaggerates and deforms . . . that he is prolix and verbose, that he lacks all sense of form" (66). He concedes that there is a "grain of truth in these accusations" (all of which are accusations that were, at one time or another, made against Miller himself, often with good reason), but that "they reflect the views of the paid critic, the academician, the frustrated novelist" (66). He then proceeds to flip each criticism on its head, arguing for instance that cinematic technique in the novel is to be desired in the age of cinema, that Jules Romain and Marcel Proust are praised for their verbosity, and that Rabelais, Swift, and Céline famously traffic in "exaggeration and deformation." He compares the supposed formlessness of Cendrars' writing with "the 'vegetal' aspects of Hindu temples, the façades of which are studded with a riot of human, animal, and other forms" (67).

He further defends Cendrars against claims that his writing is too rambling and free-form by claiming that his "detours, parentheses, [and] asides . . . are the embryonic pith and substance of books yet to come," but says that "when it is expedient or efficacious to be brief, he is brief and to the point—like a dagger" (67). While Miller is certainly correct when he says that Cendrars' books "reflect his lack of fixed habits, or better yet, his ability to break a habit (a sign of real emancipation!)" (67), most of his

claims about the ways in which Cendrars is taken by readers and critics are of the straw man variety. I know of few, if any, critics active in the time prior to Miller's essay who seriously took Cendrars to task on these grounds. In America, his works were hardly known, and in France and elsewhere they were generally well received. Miller is so eager to persuade his readers of Cendrars' literary (and human) virtues that he to some degree imagines legions of critics ready to knock down his idol. One wonders if Miller is more concerned about his own critics (and his own self-criticism) than he is about these phantom enemies of Cendrars.

By the time Henry Miller published *The Books in My Life* in 1952, he'd had a chance to read Cendrars' tetralogy, and he spends many pages rhapsodizing over these legitimately important books. He mentions other works too, including the one he's received most recently, *La Banlieue de Paris*, a text-and-photography fine art book with pictures by Robert Doisneau, published in 1949, in which he says Cendrars "resuscitates the drama of hope, longing, failure, ennui, despair, frustration, misery and resentment which devours the denizens of this vast belt" (77). Then Miller closes his long and adulatory essay, signing off as follows:

My dear Cendrars, you must at times have sensed a kind of envy in me for all that you have lived through, digested, and vomited forth transformed, transmogrified, transubstantiated. As a child you played by Virgil's tomb; as a mere lad you tramped across Europe, Russia, Asia, to stoke the furnace in some forgotten hotel in Peking; as a young man, in the bloody days of the Legion, you elected to remain a corporal, no more; as a war

victim, you begged for alms in your own dear Paris, and a little later you were on the bum in New York, Boston, New Orleans, Frisco . . . You have roamed far, you have idled the days away, you have burned the candle at both ends, you have made friends and enemies, you have dared to write the truth, you have known how to be silent, you have pursued every path to the end, and you are still in your prime . . . How foolish, how absurd of me to think that I might be of help to *you*, that by putting in my little word for you here and there . . . I would be advancing your cause. You have no need of *my* help or of anyone's. Just living your life as you do you automatically aid us, all of us, everywhere where life is lived.

. . .

You always close your greetings with "ma main amie." I grasp that warm left hand you proffer and I wring it with joy, with gratitude, and with an everlasting benediction on my lips.

(79-80)

For all of Miller's near-sycophantic praise of Cendrars, it is clear from their correspondence of 1947-1961 that Cendrars had affection for Miller too. The two exchanged many books, each sending the other their newest publications. Miller's letters continued to be overlong and Cendrars' quite short; Miller occasionally and gently chided Cendrars for his terseness: "Votre petit mot (vraiment trop petit!) m'a trouvé ici où je demeure depuis trois ans, marié encore une fois et père d'une fille âgée d'un an et demi,"

he wrote from Big Sur on July 6, 1947 (*Correspondances* 91). Cendrars replied on December 17, writing “Merci de votre bonne et longue lettre. Ecrivez souvent! Et même si je ne répons pas toujours . . . Et merci de tout ce que vous faites, mais ne vous dérangez pas pour moi ni pour mes livres.” He then adds, as an afterthought, “Les éditeurs sont les plus grands ennemis des écrivains. Ils veulent toujours la même chose: le succès!” (*Correspondances* 107).

Occasionally, Cendrars commented on particular books of Miller’s. Such was the case when he wrote Miller on December 7, 1948, responding to his reading of *Black Spring*, which had been published in France by the N.R.F. in 1947:

Mon cher Henry Miller,

Je vous disais l’autre jour que *Black Spring* est un bon livre. Aujourd’hui je voudrais ajouter que depuis votre grand livre sur Paris, vous n’avez rien écrit de plus fort que *La Boutique du tailleur*. Quand vous déciderez-vous à écrire un livre sur ce sacré vieux New York que nous aimons tant? C’est ce que vos admirateurs français attendent de vous, ainsi que les Russes, je veux dire les lecteurs de Gogol ou de Dostoïewski.

Happy Christmas!

Blaise Cendrars

(*Correspondances* 157)

The piece Cendrars praises, “The Tailor Shop,” is a reminiscence of Miller’s days working in his father’s Brooklyn shop before and during the First World War (at the same time, incidentally, that Cendrars was fighting and suffering grievous wounds in Champagne). It was included in both *Black Spring* (originally published by Obelisk Press in Paris in 1936) and in Miller’s essay collection *The Cosmological Eye* (1939).

Cendrars’ positive reaction to “The Tailor Shop” comes with a gracefully delivered caveat, however: when are you going to again write something as good as this? He urges Miller to write about old New York, believing that it is his proper milieu and a subject in which readers would be interested. In a sense, Cendrars is trying to rein Miller in and counsel him to write what he knows best.

In December 1949, Cendrars returned to Villefranche-sur-Mer and found a package from Miller waiting for him. The package contained Miller’s just-published novel *Sexus*, book one of the *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, which he would publish between 1949 and 1960. Cendrars’ response to *Sexus* was noticeably cool (as was the response of most critics): “Terminé la lecture des deux premier volumes de *Sexus*. Ce sont des livres sans poésie mais les seuls vrais sur New York. Je ne vous en demande pas davantage. Merci” (*Correspondances* 195). Later, in April 1950, Cendrars again wrote Miller about *Sexus*: “Je vous ai écrit pour vous dire que j’ai reçu l’exemplaire n°1 du tome I et du tome II de cet ouvrage plein de cochonneries atomiques qui loin de le détruire me restituent le New York que j’ai connu, il y a 40 ans, à l’époque de la Ferre School, Union Square, etc., etc.” (*Correspondances* 205). Under the pen of another writer, “cochonneries atomiques” might be considered as a criticism or even an insult, but coming from Cendrars it was likely a compliment.

In May 1950, Cendrars was in Paris, where he wrote Miller that “Paris n’a jamais été si beau! . . . Je suis heureux et n’écris pas et ne lis pas. C’est peut-être ça. Je flâne dans les rues de Paris après dix ans d’absence. C’est fou! Ma main amie, Blaise Cendrars” (*Correspondances* 207). This letter shows Cendrars coming out of his long exile, returning to Paris, and sending Miller happy letters apropos of no news in particular. The rate of his correspondence certainly increased during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.

In June 1951, Henry Miller and his wife, Lepska, separated, and she and their children moved from Big Sur to Long Beach, in southern California (Ferguson 312-13). Miller, unlike Cendrars, was an attentive father to his children Valentine and Tony, and the distance involved in the new arrangement did not sit well with him. On February 20, 1952, he wrote Cendrars about the situation and offered a few impressions of the Los Angeles area:

Il m’a fallu rendre les enfants à leur mère qui réside près de Los Angeles. Tout seul, comme j’étais finalement, je n’ai pu faire tout. Alors, je viens de leur payer une visite—*1,000 miles* par car aller et retour! L’Asie ne me semble guère plus loin.

. . .

En passant par San Pedro j’ai vu des centaines de « oil wells » — cela me donne l’horreur. Los Angeles—la plus grande ville du monde aujourd’hui—me fait penser que nous sommes tous fous. Je ne connais

rien au monde plus faux, plus artificiel, et plus pervers. « We live among the shells », a dit quelqu'un, et c'est vrai. Tout est illusion.

...

Mais, qu'a dit Saint-Thomas d'Aquin— « Tout ce que j'ai écrit me paraît maintenant comme de la paille » ? C'est de la trahison, des paroles comme ça, n'est pas?

Je pense à vous constamment.

(Correspondances 245-6)

On March 13, Cendrars replied. Typically, he did not comment on Miller's personal travaux (nor did he typically share anything with Miller about his own relationships or personal life), but he did render an opinion on Los Angeles, a city he had visited in 1936: "Vous avez raison, Los Angeles est une horreur sans nom, en outre c'est la ville au monde où l'on se suicide le plus! Saint-Thomas d'Aquin ne va pas aussi loin quant aux livres que l'Ecclésiaste! Je me réjouis de recevoir bientôt les vôtres" (*Correspondances* 246).

Miller wrote Cendrars on April 5 and told him "Tout commence de tourner pour le mieux pour moi—fin d'un mauvais cycle, je crois. Mais quel cauchemar j'ai traversé!" (*Correspondance* 247). In his reply, Cendrars did address Miller's personal struggles, one of the rare times he did so: "Heureux d'apprendre que cela va mieux pour vous. (J'avais

fait des tas de bons signes!)” In an editorial note appended to Cendrars’ letter, Jay Bochner explains “des tas de bons signes”:

C’étaient toute sorte de petits rituels que Raymone [Cendrars] pratiquait—avec un sérieux atténué d’humour—auxquels Blaise assistait avec tendresse: un cierge allumé, un geste de la main allant de la tête au cœur répété trois fois, une caresse sur une photographie, le pouce du poing entre l’index et le médium . . . c’était concrétiser les bonnes pensées dirigées vers un être, vers un projet, en faisant confiance à leur influence.

(*Correspondances* 248)

The image of Blaise and Raymone Cendrars saying incantations in their apartment at 23 rue Jean-Dolent in Paris in order to send good energy to Henry Miller in Big Sur, California, is indeed charming, and shows that despite the general master-student relationship between the two men, Blaise Cendrars had genuine affection and concern for his friend Miller.

On September 25, 1952, Miller forwarded Cendrars a letter from Al Jennings, a celebrated American train robber of the 1890s who befriended O. Henry in the first decade of the twentieth century, established a career as a silent film actor, and had written a book, *Through the Shadows With O. Henry* (1921), that Cendrars translated and published in 1936 as *Hors la loi!*

. . . *la vie d'un outlaw américain racontée par lui-même*. Miller had written to Jennings and told him of his friendship with Cendrars; Jennings replied with the following:

Dear H.M.

Just returned to my "hide-out" (Tarzana). Happy to hear from you.

Enclosed find \$5.00 for *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* [a book Miller had published in 1949]. I will be ninety years old November 25th with contempt for public officials and business crooks.

Please let me trouble you for Blaise Cendrars' address. *I fell for that fine man.*

Greetings and every good thing for you.

Faithfully yours

Al Jennings

Miller forwarded Jennings' letter to Cendrars, and added "Si j'étais vous, je serais bien fier de cette ligne, si simple et d'un ton mi-tendre, mi-naïf, mi-argot: « *I fell for that fine man*»,» and shared with Cendrars Jennings' address, 18824 Hatteras Street, Tarzana, California so that he could write him directly (*Correspondances* 260).

In December 1952, Miller and his new female companion, Eve McClure, who would later become his third wife, traveled to Paris. They celebrated the new year with Blaise and Raymone, the first time the two men had met face-to-face in 13 years, but this was their only known meeting during Miller's months-long stay in Europe. Why they

didn't spend more time together is unclear, but it may have had to do with the fact that Miller was returning to France as a sort of literary hero, his reputation there having strengthened considerably since he was last there in 1939. He was toasted and feted and deluged with interviews and well-wishers. For once, it might have been Miller rather than Cendrars who was too busy.

Almost a year later, in December 1953, Miller wrote Cendrars, asking for news of him: "Je pense à vous souvent. J'attends toujours entendre que vous êtes parti—pour la brousse—en Afrique ou en Orient." Cendrars replied five days later, writing "Les gens ont du retard. Ils me veulent dans la brousse. Ils ont cinquante ans de retard, Je suis à la maison, comme vous m'avez vu, le 1^{er} janvier 53. Merde, il y a un an! Alors, bonne année à vous deux, Eve et vous. Je vous embrasse. Blaise" (*Correspondances* 273). The truth is that Cendrars' days of going "into the bush" and knocking about the globe were long gone. His health was not good—he'd endured surgery for cataracts and the years in Aix-en-Provence had diminished him—and for perhaps the first time in his adult life he was sticking close to home.

By March 16, 1954, Miller had returned to Big Sur, from which he wrote Cendrars a letter detailing a meeting with a potential publisher for English-language translations of Cendrars' books and also detailing a curious case of his own Cendrars collection having gone missing:

I write you in English today because it would take too long for me to say it in French. It is this—

Yesterday I received a visit, unexpectedly, from a Richard A. Carroll, whose card I enclose. We had a wonderful talk—mostly about you. He resembles you in many ways—a sort of American “edition” of Cendrars.

...

His firm publishes only original mss., not reprints. But he says they would take French books to translate, if they liked them. I wanted to give him something of yours to read but—since I returned from Europe I cannot find a single work of yours. My whole collection of Cendrars is missing. Either I hid them away so safely I have forgotten where, or someone stole them. But—only *your* books are missing; not a single other volume.

Curious!

(*Correspondances* 383)

About a month later, Cendrars wrote Miller back, saying that he would have his editor send Richard Carroll a copy of *La Main coupée* for consideration. As for the missing books, he wrote “Quelle drôle d’histoire que celle de mes livres qui vous ont tous été volés! On vous en enverra d’autres” (*Correspondances* 277). Miller probably didn’t find the case of the missing books amusing, but he must have been touched by Cendrars’ offer to send him replacements. By the time Miller wrote Cendrars on July 5, the case had been solved: “Eureka! Vos livres dénichés à la bibliothèque à Los Angeles aux bons soins du directeur. Après un beau rêve à bonne heure un matin je me suis rappelé de cet individu et que je les ai confiés à lui, pendant mon absence. Alors, la mémoire n’a pas fait faillite! Quelle veine!” (*Correspondances* 278). Jay Bochner offers a note detailing Miller’s

missing Cendrars books, and how the incident actually led to the long-term preservation of archival Miller-Cendrars materials:

Avant de partir en voyage, Miller avait confié tout ce qu'il possédait de Blaise Cendrars—un trésor à protéger! — à la bibliothèque de l'université de Californie de Los Angeles. Ce trésor fait partie maintenant du département Special Collections.

C'est grâce à la prévoyance de Henry Miller, et à l'amabilité du directeur qui nous a procuré les copies, que nous avons pu joindre les lettres de Cendrars aux lettres de Miller, conservées au Fonds Blaise Cendrars, Archives littéraires de la bibliothèque nationale suisse, Berne, et publier le présent ouvrage.

(Correspondances 279)

Thus, in a very direct way, by donating his books and papers, including his Cendrars collection, to UCLA, Henry Miller made it possible for American readers and scholars to come to know something of the Cendrars he had known. No less specifically, Miller is responsible for generations of Americans having access to Cendrars. Many readers in the United States, including me, first heard of Cendrars by way of Miller; and once having read his rhapsodic testimonies to the man and his work, who could help but seek out his books? One can trace a genealogy of Cendrars in America that starts with Henry Miller,

runs through Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, and other Beat Generation writers and their comrades, and beyond to the present day. As Jay Bochner writes:

Cendrars chantait pour la bohème américaine ce que nous appellerions aujourd’hui sa *counterculture*: le Greenwich Village new-yorkais des années Vingt, les Beats des années Cinquante (en suivant les leçons de leur premier gourou, Kenneth Rexroth), la « New » New York School après John O’Hara, avec John Ashbery puis Ron Padgett et d’autres du Poetry Project, et, en parallèle, le jazz de Steve Lacy ou Garrett List et la poésie Punk de Patti Smith. La permanence de ces sursauts dans la culture américaine sera assurée par Henry Miller . . .

(“Le Visage Américain de Cendrars,” 118)

Cendrars’ influence can clearly be seen in Ginsberg’s most famous poem, “Howl,” with its long, maximalist lines and its decentered consciousness, and the vagabondage for which he is well-known inspired Ginsberg and his fellow Beats to uproot themselves and take to the open road in America and elsewhere. Tracing the ripple effect of Cendrars’ influence, critic Marjorie Perloff wrote in her essay “Alterable Noons: The ‘poèmes élastiques’ of Blaise Cendrars and Frank O’Hara”:

When we ask ourselves where, on the map of modern Anglo-American poetry, we may find analogues to a Blaise Cendrars, we must look not to

Cendrars' contemporaries (Pound, Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, even Williams) but to the generation that came of age in America after the Second World War, the generation of Black Mountain and the Beats, Concrete Poetry and "Naked Poetry," Ethnopoetics and Performance. To put it the other way around: what we call "postmodernism" in American poetry may be less the revolution its proponents claim it to be than an injection of French "modernism," the mode of Cendrars, of Apollinaire, later of Dada, into the native American stream that comes down to us from Emerson and Whitman.

(160-1)

Patti Smith, who is still writing and performing today, and is a recent national Book Award winner, discovered Cendrars in the late 1960s. Speaking at The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Place in New York City in 1971, she described her primary influences as "the radio, the movie camera, Blaise Cendrars, the electric guitar, and Sam Shepard" (quoted in Dewey 49). The next year, 1972, she published the poem "ladies and gentlemen, blaise cendrars is not dead" in the issue #25 of the magazine *The World*, edited by Anne Waldman:

Ladies and gentlemen
 Blaise Cendrars is not dead
 that rummy you buried in such
 grave ceremony was his own enemy

true the right arm gone
Blaise slashed it himself
that little puff box run
run at the mouth
was jack rolling our hero
with a wicked pack of cards
But Blaise a jack dandy himself
noted the error
(all the chips were on puff boxes' side)
and like the great Hammurabi
Blaise cut him down
right hand for that bad hand of poker

He is alive in every marked deck
every poker chip
he has a pair of slick dice
and he'll wheel you straight to hell
and when you dial round the black market
you deal with him
yes it's our man who drops that cigar ash
on the receiving end
yes it's him crooning liquid music
and sonorous tin pan

through every cable line
linking every slob sister swindler
little snakesman two bit gambler
anyone
even slightly illegal and angel
has an ash in their vest pocket
and a kodak of that scoundrel
vainer now one armed crack face
than this mock hardy youth
he drags me in and out
of every photo booth
and praises in bad poetry
the polaroid sixty second snap

A fool hearty documentarian
his choppers have spun the globe
and for want of a straw hat we were trapped
knee deep in the swamps of Panama
we suffered malaria
and as a result
slaughtered 2/3 the mosquito population
of that hot hole
Christ it was a lusty battle

we were sick with laughter
and sick ourselves
runny assed and cunt with clap
hair red with crabs and lice
in our boots we rolled our own smokes
twisted up a few panama reds
and plotted the destruction of that wily insect
we danced to Vulcan our private god of flame
and sacrificed a few of those blood suckers
snapping their heads with our nails
which turned our hero slightly pale

Some years I bragged the beauty of my hands
I cried,
“I have music neath these fingernails”
and true these fists never failed
to spiel whole logs full of
literatures Roman à clef
and now it's come to this
mosquito in fire
mosquito death hiss

Christ then it began again
the old fever and thirst
for raging fire
with torches we ran whole lengths
of those Panama fields
and as the brush caught up
I cried out in my most disgusting French
Blaze on Blaise
and that bastard burnt me with a cigarette

Like a great epic movie
we've reeled the world
why only six months ago
I assisted that cur in the most marvelous
hoax of the gentle midwest
Our wagon rolling in a dry bone state
Blaise posed as Louis Saucer
humble rainmaker prophet in rain boots
but when the clouds cracked
the white rain was liquor
and all of Iowa was soused with tequila
every pour sap that poured to the scene
of the great rain left drenched

to the teeth
and drunk to the teeth

Blaise curled that famous lip
and we laughed and laughed
and caused more mischief since
It was his ticklish fingers
that caused Mick the jagger
to dance like a fish
he shot lightning from the theatres
robbed the actors of their shadows
and backstage mirrors
it was his sassy diseased kiss
that laid miss universe out with the mumps
the recession? our man's been pinballing
with the Jewish jewel thieves
feeding opium into IBM
and sparing no one the bugger
robs school children

The dirty shit still spits poetry
between his clicking spaced teeth
tracing aerial views of Greenland

land of the treacherous iceage
 and fanatic hun
 gold mine dreams in goat canyon
 charting the gold where the moon slaps
 then drunk with that special glitter
 running lyrics in gold dust inks

There is also the contemporary American writer Luc Sante, whose latest book is *The Other Paris* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), and who “can cross influences like Blaise Cendrars and JG Ballard with James M. Cain and Raymond Roussel,” according to an article published in *The Guardian* on January 2, 2016. The number of Cendrars devotees in the English-speaking world might be small, but those who exist are truly devoted, and were it not for the passionate advocacy for Cendrars undertaken for almost fifty years by Henry Miller, there would surely be far fewer of them.

Between 1958 and the death of Blaise Cendrars in 1961, the correspondence between Cendrars and Miller grew far less frequent. The primary cause of this drop off was Cendrars’ health; in July 1956, he suffered an attack of hemiplegia, a condition resulting in profound weakness on the left side of his body. The condition was to plague him for the rest of his life. On the 18th of August 1956, he sent Miller a letter written in a handwriting clearly not his own; he had been forced to dictate the letter and have someone else write it for him:

Mon cher Henry Miller,

Votre message me souhaitant de ne pas trop travailler et de faire attention m'est arrivé trop tard. Depuis un mois, j'ai la jambe gauche et le bras gauche paralysés et ma main unique, qui gouvernait la machine à écrire, ne m'obéit plus.

C'est le plus sale truc qui pouvait m'arriver!

Il faut beaucoup de patience et de bonne volonté pour pouvoir vaincre tout cela, mettons d'ici un an.

(Correspondances 285)

Once Miller learned of Cendrars' condition, he began to write him less often—apparently not out of a lack of concern, but because he did not want to pester him. “Je n'aime pas cette saison (de folie) mais je pense à vous et me demande comment vous êtes à ce moment,” Miller wrote to Cendrars on December 14, 1957. “On me donne des nouvelles de vous de temps en temps—nos amis mutuels” (*Correspondances* 288). Then on May 11 of the same year, he wrote him again: “Je pense à vous constamment mais ne vous écris pas. Que dire? Je sais que vous êtes souffrant et que nous, si loin, ne pouvons rien faire. Des paroles manquent” (*Correspondances* 289). Miller also began to write Miriam Cendrars, Blaise's daughter; Miriam had visited Miller at Big Sur in 1948. On November 10, 1958, he wrote:

Dear Miriam Cendrars,

I wonder if you could spare the time to write me a few lines telling me how your father is doing. I think of him all the time, but I don't write because I don't want to make him say that he is suffering—it's too cruel.

I am passing through San Francisco where I shall see a doctor myself—nothing serious—and each time I've come up here I've always written Blaise a note or a card.

I always remember your brief visit to Big Sur and keep hoping that you will come back again one day and see us. Also, I have tried in vain for years now, to get a mail address for you. Someone suggested this. I hope it reaches you. Where are you, I wonder?

I do hope all is well with you, that you are happy in whatever you are doing. If you see your dear father, give him warmest greetings, won't you?

Bless you!

Henry Miller

(Correspondances 389)

This letter did apparently reach Miriam, because the next letter from Miller to her, dated December 11, 1958, indicates that she had received it and replied to it (though the reply

letter from Miriam to Henry Miller is missing from *Correspondances*, alas). In that December 11 letter, Miller writes that he had “managed to write Blaise a little word. It’s difficult” (*Correspondances* 389).

In April 1959, Miller and his children and his wife Eve returned to Europe, staying for a few weeks in a flat on rue Campagne-Première. He came in part to claim “540,000 francs that his European agents Hoffmann were holding for him in France” (Ferguson 335), but while in Paris he also saw Blaise Cendrars for the last time. After returning to Big Sur, he wrote Miriam Cendrars on October 22, 1959:

For weeks, I have been trying to get up courage to wrote to Blaise. I just can’t do it. I think of him all the time, but I can’t find the words to say to him. Would you, when you see him again, please give him my love? I suppose he is even worse now than when I saw him. That was such a terrible moment, such a shock. He, of all men, to be stricken thus.

(*Correspondances* 390)

Meanwhile, Miller had been suffering also, though his problems were of the marital and not the medical variety, problems caused in large part by his philandering (and in this case, by his wife Eve’s alcoholism). At the end of their 1959 European trip, Eve had served Henry with divorce papers while he was in Cannes; he was there to serve as a judge for that city’s legendary film festival.

Blaise Cendrars died on January 21, 1961. Henry Miller was in Berlin when he received the news, and it was from Berlin that he wrote Miriam Cendrars on January 28:

Dear Miriam Cendrars,

I only learned today, from a friend in Paris, of your father's death a week ago. He said that Blaise died peacefully. That is good to know. It was cruel that he should have had to wait so long—in such agony. He did not deserve such a fate. But it is over, at last, and we must be grateful. Only a giant could have survived so long.

...

I shall say no more about this wonderful, wonderful man who played such an important role in my life—as he did in many others as well. For me he is not dead. He is only absent for a while—and then we shall meet again. I wept when I received the news, but if I weep again it will be from joy, because of all he meant, all he gave. Such as he are with us always.

All good wishes now, my dear Miriam Cendrars. Now, alas, when it is too late, they will glorify him.

Ever yours,

Henry Miller

(Correspondances 392)

Miller had occasional contact with Miriam Cendrars in the years following Blaise's death, mostly to discuss the potential publication of the Miller-Cendrars correspondence. For instance, on July 1, 1971, he wrote her from his home in Pacific Palisades, California, where he lived from 1963 until his death in 1980:

I never knew I wrote that many letters to Blaise. I doubt if he wrote anywhere near that amount to me. When I left Paris for Greece in 1939 I destroyed all existing correspondence, I think. Any letters I may have received since returning to U.S. in 1940 I probably donated to U.C.L.A. library, Dept. of Special Collections.

...

You would know better than I, after seeing what letters I may have received from Blaise, whether the letters would make interesting reading. There are several other people, now dead, with whom I have had large correspondence, it seems. The publishers are really the ones to decide.

(*Correspondances* 384-5)

Miriam Cendrars would help to publish the Miller-Cendrars correspondence, though it would not appear in book form until 1995, when Denoël would publish *Correspondance, 1934-1979: 45 ans d'amitié*. The epigraph for the book, taken from a letter Cendrars

wrote to Miller in 1951, is apt: “Moi, ce qui me réjouit, c’est de me trouver avec vous sous la même couverture, comme si l’on faisait une bonne blague aux copains!”

Blaise Cendrars obviously had great impact on Henry Miller, though that impact manifests itself more in the man than in the work. We can take Miller at his word when he says, in myriad ways, that no writer was as important to him as was Cendrars. For all the effusive praise Miller heaped on Cendrars, however, he never wrote like Cendrars, nor did he ever appear to try. He owed Cendrars a great debt, to be sure—*Tropic of Cancer* made Miller’s literary career, and Cendrars’ initial review of the book launched *Tropic of Cancer*—but he repaid that debt by attracting new readers to Cendrars’ work, most specifically American readers, rather than by trying to imitate the man he considered a master.

Perhaps ironically, there is a case to be made that Miller in fact influenced Cendrars’ writing more than Cendrars’ writing influenced Miller. Jay Bochner argues this point persuasively in his essay “An American Writer Born in Paris: Blaise Cendrars Reads Henry Miller Reading Blaise Cendrars,” published in the Spring 2003 issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*. After his novels of the 1920s (*L’Or*, *Moravagine*, *Le plan de l’aiguille*, and *Les confessions de Dan Yack*), Blaise Cendrars cast around for new modes and new forms. In the 1930s he tried his hand at reportage and the short story, publishing books such as *Rhum—L’aventure de Jean Galmot*, which is an investigation of the mysterious death of the quixotic, French-born, Guyanese politician Galmot; *Panorama de la pègre*, a survey of the Parisian underworld and demimonde; *Hollywood: la Mecque du cinéma*, comprising reports commissioned by *Paris-Soir*; *Histoires vraies*, *La vie dangereuse*, and *D’Oultremer à Indigo*, all of which are collections of short

fiction; and, most significantly for Bochner's argument, two short autobiographical books, *Une nuit dans la forêt* (1929) and *Vol à voile* (1932). In these last two books, Bochner sees Cendrars moving toward the narrative mode that would define his postwar tetralogy: "prochronie," a word Cendrars coined himself and used as the subtitle for *Vol à voile*. Bochner defines prochronie as "the reorganization of time as it is affected by the memory at work" (115) and cites the work of critic Claude Leroy, who has made prochronie central to his understanding of Cendrars' oeuvre. According to Bochner, though Cendrars first began working with the concept in the 1930s, these efforts didn't bear much fruit: "These are, in terms of the full-blown 'prochronie' of the saga, more preparations, discrete stories that do not build to the complexity of whole worlds of memory at work [in the tetralogy]" (115). So where does Henry Miller fit in to the development of this prochronie that will find its full flowering in the Cendrars' postwar tetralogy? Jay Bochner connects it directly to Cendrars' reading of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934: "*Tropic of Cancer* provided the Cendrars of *A Night in the Forest* with a more elaborate model. I imagine a Cendrars in whom the prochronic saga is still only germinating, as he registers the presence of the writing author of *Tropic*. . ." (115-6).

Bochner's "more elaborate model" is that of a narrative in which memory catches up with the writing moment itself, or more precisely a model in which the action of writing triggers memory and the momentum of that memory brings the reader (and the writer) right back to the writing moment where they cycle began—and the cycle is repeated over and over again. Bochner elaborates:

Miller has adapted the metafictional conceit Laurence Sterne evoked so long ago in *Tristram Shandy*: the recounted events in one's autobiography threaten to catch up with the drafting of them. The most recent events are in quick pursuit, right behind the author's physical act of writing, and, potentially, almost no time at all separates an experience and the drying of the ink, which itself would be the last subject, just before the writing disappeared into itself. The narrative can only continue if the present can be postponed.

(116)

Much of *Tropic of Cancer* has the author at his typewriter, wondering what to write, and in some cases the writing of an event comes before the event itself. He works past the "writing dilemma" not only by recollecting the past, but also by laying out the material for the adventure of the day to come. "At the outset of many chapters [of *Tropic*], a curious sensation strikes us," writes Bochner, "that what beckons in the street is not there yet, nothing has taken place there, but a sheet of paper has been inserted . . ." (116). The real pleasure of reading Miller, says Bochner, lies not so much in his characters or his stories, "but in his start-ups, the energy of his voice as it overcomes the inertia of every opening" (116). Miller seems to be always looking for a story, and doubting his ability to make them; thus "the ones he tells befall him, accidentally, to interrupt this writing of himself," becoming an "antifictionalist" novelist "invaded by stories he does not want to invent" (117).

So what is the effect of this model on Cendrars? For more than four years he sat at his typewriter, “immobilized in his cold kitchen in Aix-en-Provence sitting out the Second World War as he began his meditations on the first one, which had taken his right arm” (117). There, haltingly at first, but gathering momentum as he goes, Cendrars turns “his gaze upon himself as he writes his own fall into memory” and commences “the full-scale absorption of the past into the present, which will be the ‘prochronie’ of the saga” (118). Bochner argues that Miller’s attempt in *Tropic of Cancer* “spurred [Cendrars] on, unless its effect was, instead, that of a burr in his side” (118). Further tying the two writers together is *Tropic of Cancer*’s epigraph, from Emerson’s journal of January-February 1841: “These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies—captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experiences, and how to record truth truly.”

Bochner calls this concept “a new, very American ideal, opening fiction to the nonfictional self.” It is certainly an idea that Cendrars embraced wholeheartedly in his four postwar masterpieces, and one with which he had only flirted before; and in the interim, between his novels of the 1920s, his reportage and short fiction of the 1930s, and the successful melding of novelistic form and nonfictional self in the 1940s, he read *Tropic of Cancer*, a novel that in many ways is precisely about the insertion of a nonfictional self into a fictional frame. As Bochner puts it, “In the place of a well-regulated procession of events can be substituted the record of that voice which claims to be, or aspires to be, autobiographic” (118-9). The lesson of *Tropic of Cancer* allowed Cendrars to forge a path “somewhere between the poet’s lyricism and the prose writer’s experience of the modern world,” a path that no longer requires that “the personal voice

and documentaries travel in separate cars” (119). And yet, having learned this lesson by seeing it demonstrated by Henry Miller, Blaise Cendrars does something different with it: whereas Miller focuses on the present, in the moment of sitting down before the typewriter and “waiting for [experience] to show its face,” for Cendrars “the past will be fuller, so prodigal as to defy form” (120). Bochner thus concludes that

Emerson’s words apply even better to Cendrars’ work, for he must sift and reorder, construct the past while Miller only waits for it. Miller’s reader wonders if anything will happen, and even how important it can be that something does, or might. Cendrars’ reader wonders if any person can live all that and if it can be brought together to mean anything.

Miller’s problem is to keep the flow flowing; Cendrars’ problem is believability and form. Before writing the saga Cendrars must find what it is, in his innumerable worlds, that properly organizes his perception of it; then, with Emerson and Miller, he must understand how much that voice is not just telling but building. Starting in 1943, sequestered in a southern town enduring the German occupation, he will grasp the principle of such building and write with a passion for memory that turns narration into a “prochronie,” a reinvesting in the past, reshaping time for the successful practice of the writer’s self-creating language.

(120)

If one accepts Bochner's premise that *Tropic of Cancer* had a profound influence on Cendrars' writing of the 1940s, albeit a subterranean one, then it is clear that the relationship between the two men could not be as one-sided as is commonly believed. Though in their correspondence Miller is the one who seems always to be grasping, Cendrars, in his own, quieter way, seems to have assimilated some salient characteristics of Miller's early work, and to have put them to good use in his own time and in his own manner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOLLYWOOD: LA CITÉ INTERDITE

On May 29, 1935, Blaise Cendrars sailed from Le Havre on the maiden voyage of the *Normandie*, a transatlantic crossing to New York. The *Normandie* was considered to be the *ne plus ultra* of ocean liners, and its launching and first voyage were the subject of extensive media coverage around the world, but especially in France. Several big Parisian publications hired writers to travel aboard the *Normandie* and file reports: *Le Figaro* had literary and drama critic Gérard Baüer, *Vu* had journalist Madeleine Jacob, *Le Journal* contracted with Colette, and Pierre Lazareff, the editor of *Paris-Soir*, enlisted Blaise Cendrars. The voyage took only four days, setting a world record.

En route, “each day Cendrars broadcast radio messages direct from the *Normandie* to millions of listeners in France, and these were then published in *Paris-Soir*” (White xxvii). Though Colette and the other writers reported on the ship’s great luxury (and it was indeed luxurious, with a dining room paneled in Lalique glass and a children’s dining room designed by Jean de Brunhoff of *Babar* fame), Cendrars reported mostly on the inner workings of the ship and on the engineers and seamen and porters and maids and cooks who made the whole thing go. As Robert Guyon writes in his book *Échos de bastingage*,

Cendrars n'est pas venu pour se goberger, ni se goinfrer ni faire des ronds de jambe à épater le bourgeois. Il laisse les chiffres et les dithyrambes aux autres journalistes à bord. Lui, il prend le parti du bateau, le parti de l'équipage. Et d'ailleurs, à la différence de [novelist] Claude Farrère ou de Colette qui voyagent en 1^{re} classe, lui, il est en 2^e, cabine n° 822 . . . pas loin des jolies filles de la troupe des Blue Bell's Girls, et d'autres artistes qui animeront le voyage.

. . .

Au moment du départ, il déclare, bougon et excité à la fois: *Ce qui m'intéresse ce sont les machines. Les tralalas et les belles réceptions des gens du monde, j'en ai rien à foutre . . .*

Est c'est là la trouvaille journalistique de Pierre Lazareff, qui aura ainsi pour ses lecteurs le décor et les paillettes avec Claude Farrère, mais aussi l'huile et la sueur, le bruit et la fureur des machines, la compétence et le travail de l'équipage, l'arrière du décor, les coulisses de l'énorme théâtre aux vanités flottant, avec Cendrars. Voyons cela de plus près en accompagnant Cendrars dans le récit de cette première traversée.

(92-3)

Though Cendrars' dispatches from the *Normandie* are interesting, for the purposes of this study they can be briefly noted. On May 31 was a story titled "Dans les flancs du bon colosse j'ai vu battre son cœur"; on June 3, "Il ne fallut que trois minutes pour que la

Normandie un instant immobilisé puisse reprendre sa route”; on June 5, the day of arrival in New York, “Tandis que New York acclamait la marche triomphale de *Normandie* ceux des machines veillaient toujours à leur poste, dans les profondeurs du navire” (in which he says of the ship’s crew “Ils ignoraient comment New York recevait leur bateau. Ils n’avaient rien vu, rien entendu, mais chaque homme avait le sourire, était content. Je serrais des mains et remontais en hâte sur le pont”); on June 7 and 13 “Á New York *Normandie* bat un nouveau record: celui de la curiosité”; and on June 21, “Un rat pourrait arrêter d’un coup la vie à bord de *Normandie*” (Guyon 96-101). All of these dispatches were first broadcast on Radio Maritime, then printed in *Paris-Soir* the following day.

Cendrars’ reporting from the *Normandie* was well-received, at least by Pierre Lazareff, because in January 1936, just seven months later, the *Paris-Soir* editor sent him to Hollywood. He may have made the crossing aboard the *Normandie* again; Garrett White, translator of the English-language version of Cendrars’ *Hollywood: Mecca of the Movies*, seems to think so (xxviii). Jay Bochner isn’t specific as to the 1936 trip that ended up in Hollywood, but does write that Cendrars made many trips aboard the *Normandie* (DR 74). What is clear is that Cendrars’ Hollywood writings were serialized in *Paris-Soir* in the first week of June 1936 as “Les Secrets d’Hollywood” and were revised and published as a book by Grasset in August 1936 under the title *Hollywood: La Mecque du cinéma*, with drawings by Jean Guérin.

French readers hoping for a juicy, inside view of “the secrets of Hollywood” were likely perplexed by what Cendrars gave them. *Hollywood* is a book more in the spirit of Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust* than of a scandal sheet. It is a peculiar tale of frustration and failure in the face of the impenetrable, byzantine studio system. If readers

were hoping for tidbits concerning movie stars, there are none. Cendrars' writing is not another "titillating exposé on life in Hollywood by a European writer," a sort of book that "might well be called a genre of its own" (White xlvi). Just like when he was reporting from the *Normandie*, Cendrars is far more interested in the everyday laborers who sustain the movie business than he is in celebrities and glamour. *Hollywood* not only offers a fascinating, idiosyncratic glimpse of the city and the film industry at the height of its "Golden Age," but also gives Cendrars an opportunity to once again voice his insightful views on America.

From the very beginning, in the first lines of his preface, Cendrars indicates to readers that this will not be a typical book about Hollywood. "Voici donc mon petit livre sur Hollywood," he writes. "Il est bien incomplet car je n'y parle ni de mon vieux copain Charlot, pour qui j'ai une si grande admiration, ni de Louise Fazenda, la seule femme comique à l'écran" (OC 4: 390). "Charlot" is Charlie Chaplin, and every reader then and now would have known him, but Louise Fazenda was a decidedly lesser light even in her heyday. By expressing his admiration for her in the book's second sentence, Cendrars announces that this will be a book of his own, reflecting his own tastes, not a compendium of encounters with A-list stars.

Cendrars also makes clear that *Hollywood* will be a book of near-infinite deferral, a phenomenon of waiting that Cendrars takes as an extended metaphor for the place itself: "Mais n'étant resté que quinze jours à Hollywood les metteurs en scène et les stars que j'aurais tant aimé voir étaient en plein travail et n'avaient ni le temps, ni les loisirs de me recevoir" (OC 4: 390). Then he launches a long list of everything that is going to be

missing from his book; though of course by mentioning all of these things, he is in fact including them:

Il manque encore bien d'autres choses à mon livre, par exemple des portraits de stars, mâles et femelles; un chapitre sur la vanité merveilleuse des *producers*; un chapitre sur les metteurs en scène et les aléas de leur métier; un chapitre sur les figurants, leurs avatars et leur exploitation; un chapitre sur les financiers du cinéma, ces pittoresques bohèmes de la finance internationale; un chapitre sur les deux mille écrivains sous contrat, attachés aux grandes firmes de Hollywood et dont les habitudes de paresse sont celles d'une lamasserie; un chapitre sur Walt Disney, ce poète à l'usine, dont le prochain film en huit bobines: *Blanchefleur des Neiges et les six Nains* comportera cent cinquante mille dessins animés, ce qui demanda comme mise au point deux à trois millions de brouillons exécutés à la main; un chapitre sur la couleur, un autre sur le relief, ces deux dernières nouveautés de l'écran; un chapitre sur la drogue, un sur les scandales, un sur les divorces, car l'on ne comprendra jamais rien à l'histoire de Hollywood si l'on ignore les extravagances sexuelles qui peuvent fuser dans cette serre chaude et comment, par exemple, l'assassinat de Telma Todd est une affaire de gousses ou comment M. de Beaugreton, émigré en Californie, fait florès et est de tous les cocktail-

party que l'on organise à son honneur, en « week-end », dans chaque bungalow.

(OC 4: 390-1)

Cendrars ends his preface with an appreciation of the artist Jean Guérin, whose drawings illustrate his book, and writes that Guérin's art captures “cette étonnante improvisation quotidienne qui fait le plus grand charme de la vie à Hollywood et qui est un spectacle dont on ne se lasse pas, car à Hollywood le cinéma est dans la rue” (OC 4: 392).

The book's first section is titled “Hollywood 1936.” Hollywood is, in Cendrars' words, “une spectacle spontané, continu, permanent, donné de jour et de nuit dans la rue, devant un décor américain qui lui sert de toile de fond.” Life there is “si intense, bigarrée, extravagante que cela ne ressemble à rien de connu” (OC 4: 394). It is “la ville mystérieuse des studios dont les portes sont hermétiquement closes et les verrières énigmatiquement passées au bleu” (OC 4: 395). Cendrars notes the hawkers of souvenirs, the scam artists, who relieve gullible sailors on shore leave of their pay with phony relics as meaningful to them as any saintly relics are to an Old World pilgrim: “les dents de sagesse (*sic*)¹¹ de Greta Garbo, les ongles de Mae West dans un écrin (*sic*), des touffes de cheveux . . . un bas de soie, un fleur, portés par telle et telle vedette dans tel et tel film—fétiches suggestifs que ces braves marins emportent dans leur lointaine patrie comme les saintes reliques du navigateur d'aujourd'hui” (OC 4: 395). He further notes how persistent these touts and profiteers of ersatz relics are, and compares Hollywood to the holy city of Jerusalem:

¹¹ “(*sic*)” is in Cendrars' original, likely emphasizing the ersatz nature of these items.

A en juger par le nombre des rabatteurs et des petits mercantis astucieux qui guettent le voyageur à son arrivée à Los Angeles et le relancent par téléphone jusque dans sa chambre d'hôtel, Hollywood doit être un lieu de pèlerinage aussi fréquente que Jérusalem où les guides polyglottes et les marchands de bondieuseries sont une plaie et vous poursuivent jusque dans l'enceinte des Lieux Saints et au tombeau du Christ en vous proposant leurs services, souvent les plus équivoques.

(OC 4: 396)

But for all the bric-a-brac Cendrars sees, he is surprised that in Hollywood he does not see a single branch of holly, "même pas en carte postale"!

After a brief history of Mrs. H.H. Wilcox, godmother of Hollywood, whose husband laid out the original plots for the city when the land was full of orange groves and scrub (and thus a city in Wilcox's imagination only) and a short section on the abiding prestige of France and the French in America (which he describes as "un surprise inattendue"), Cendrars offers an unusual section that is nevertheless entirely Cendrarsian in character: "Hollywood demain et il y a deux cent cinquante mille ans." He begins it by writing:

J'aime Hollywood et je crois en son avenir et à sa fortune, non pas parce que Hollywood est la capitale universelle d'une industrie nouvelle dont le roulement d'argent se chiffre annuellement par des milliards de dollars,

mais parce que cette ville, qui en est encore à ses débuts, est située sur sept collines comme toutes les villes d'art qui ont joué un rôle dans l'histoire de la civilisation. En outre, comme à Florence ou à Paris, je suis réveillé tous les matins par le chant des oiseaux, et cela aussi est de bon augure.

(OC 4: 398)

Saying that all the great cities of art in the world have been situated on seven hills is a bold and dubious assertion, but Cendrars makes it and does not pause to reflect on it. For him, Hollywood occupies a very special geographical zone, and it is for that reason that it has achieved its colossal successes. Even if the movie studios were to close up shop and move their entire operations elsewhere (which he considers a real possibility, since America “est le pays des solutions radicales et des coups de Bourse les plus foudroyants”), he would still believe in the future of Hollywood (OC 4: 399). And why specifically does he believe that? Because

le passé est le plus sûr garant de l'avenir, et des centaines de milliers d'années avant que M^{me} Wilcox donne un nom à ce pays, la région où s'élève aujourd'hui Hollywood était déjà un centre intarissable d'activité et de vie. Je n'en veux pour preuve que les innombrables squelettes de mammoths déterrés durant ces vingt-cinq dernières années au fur et à mesure de l'édification de la ville actuelle et ceux que l'on met encore à jour (et que l'on porte intacts au Musée de Los Angeles qui en a une

collection beaucoup plus impressionnante que le Musée de Leningrad)
chaque fois que l'on creuse les fondations d'un nouveau gratte-ciel.

(OC 4: 399)

But Hollywood is not unique in this regard; according to Cendrars, there are places across the globe that are particularly well suited to the prosperity of animals and humans alike, and Hollywood just happens to be one of these blessed areas:

Il y a ainsi disséminés sur la planète des lieux prédestinés où depuis la nuit des temps l'homme, à la suite des grands troupeaux préhistoriques qu'il chassait, s'est installé, a fait souche et s'est multiplié grâce à son industrie et à des conditions climatiques optima. Ces lieux exceptionnels de prolifération et de vie lui étaient indiqués par la sagesse des « grands éléphants », très sensible aux variations de la température et à l'exposition géographique. Je note, sans vouloir faire étalage d'une vaine érudition, que les vieux chroniqueur espagnol Cabrillo (1542) signale l'exubérance de la végétation, l'abondance du gibier dans la vallée et qu'il qualifie le climat de la région de *deliciosa*, vantant particulièrement l'emplacement des villages des Indiens « Cahuanhas » dans les collines « au débouché des montagnes et bien l'abri des vents du nord », à l'emplacement exact que le site de Hollywood occupe aujourd'hui.

Paris, Londres, Rome, Athènes, Pékin sont construites sur des « cimetières d'éléphants » et je crois que pas une métropole historique n'a pas réussi et durer en dehors de la zone de migration, de transhumance des mammoths du quaternaire, zone qui se trouve délimiter ainsi la zone de la civilisation humaine.

Ne croyez pas à une ville-champignon sur le modèle de ces agglomérations américaines éphémères et sans lendemain, désertées aussitôt qu'édifiées parce que les gens y meurent d'ennui. Hollywood a su capter, ranimer un ancien centre de vie où des milliers et des milliers de générations étaient déjà venues s'établir pour vivre en commun et se réjouir, et c'est ce lointain passé oublié qui en fait, malgré l'aspect palpitant, improvisé et flambant neuf de ses rues, une des capitales les plus mystérieuses et de plus fermées du globe, en un mot: un véritable cité interdite.

(OC 4: 399-400)

Presumably, *Paris-Soir* readers were not expecting disquisitions on mammoths and migration patterns and the like from their correspondent in Hollywood, but that's what Cendrars gave them. It is in these sorts of flights of fancy that we begin to see the method that would result in the great leaps of time, space, and subject that would characterize Cendrars' work six to eight years later in the tetralogy.

The book's second section, titled "La cité interdite," covers diverse topics, as we've come to expect from Cendrars. Much of it deals with his impressions of America, some of which are registered from on board the Chief, one of the deluxe trains of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway, offering service between Chicago and Los Angeles; thus this subsection doesn't even take place in Hollywood at all, and stretches the meaning of "la cité interdite" to include perhaps America in general.

Cendrars writes that *trompe-l'oeil* is "un phénomène de l'optique américaine . . . qui finit par tromper la raison elle-même . . . Jacques Lory, le correspondant permanent de *Paris-Soir* à Hollywood, appelle cette ville la capitale du *pays de la quatrième dimension*, pays chimérique" (OC 4: 402-3). He sees himself as an observer of "la vie américaine et ses manifestations si souvent exagérées, sinon hystériques qui se déroulent comme dans un film et qui ont, la plupart du temps, l'air d'avoir été réglées d'avance par un metteur en scène de cinéma" (OC 4: 403). The implication of American life playing itself out as if it were on a movie set, however, is far from innocent; Cendrars speaks of "la déformation qu'une optique à trop grande échelle, dans un décor démesuré exerce fatalement et fait subir à la raison de l'homme, au point de rendre sa logique absurde et sa méthode de simplification et de standard de vie, d'une monstrueuse complexité" (OC 4: 404).

Taking a view of American society as a whole (as it was in 1936), Cendrars is far from optimistic. He believes American leaders have become the victims of their abiding faith in limitless progress, and cannot see that its advanced technologies and diverse practical, useful accessories for ease of daily living "maintenant empiètent sur leur vie, et jusque dans leur intimité" (OC 4: 404). Surely this is even more true today than it was in

1936, and in this viewpoint and many others that follow in *Hollywood*, Cendrars proves himself to be quite prescient. For example, in the subsection called “Fecisti Patriam Diversis Gentibus Unam” (which is a line from the 5th century poem “De Reditu Suo” by Namatianus, meaning roughly “have a homeland for the people dispersed in a hundred places”), he writes that “on a souvent l’impression aujourd’hui que les gens en Amérique deviennent fous, tellement on sent l’homme de la rue ou de la campagne désaxé, désappointé, déçu, fatigué, amorphe et ne réagissant plus” (OC 4: 405). That’s a grim assessment, and one that is likely as true today as it was when Cendrars made the observation in 1936. Again, it is probably not the fare that the *Paris-Soir* crowd craved.

The following subsection, “Un Technocrate: Harold Loeb,” takes place aboard the aforementioned Chicago to Los Angeles train. Harold Loeb was an interesting character, someone Cendrars had previously known in France. In the 1920s, he was active on the avant-garde arts scene in Paris, publishing the influential, English-language magazine *Broom* from 1921 to 1924, in which he published Cendrars’ “Profond aujourd’hui.” He also wrote several novels in the 1920s, and others wrote about him; most famously (or infamously), Ernest Hemingway based the insecure, self-conscious dilettante Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises* on Harold Loeb.

Cendrars writes that he first met Loeb in Rome in 1921 and saw him again in Paris in 1925 (White 44). They meet again on the train, by chance. By 1936, “le dada actuel de Harold Loeb est la réforme de l’État et ce vieil Harold se dit aujourd’hui « technocrate » car il est l’auteur d’un livre *The Chart of Plenty* qui a fait sensation dans les milieux officiels, politiques, financiers, d’affaires,” a book that according to Cendrars can be summed up in a single phrase: “L’Amérique doit faire son plein” (OC 4: 406).

Loeb's thesis, buttressed with copious graphs and tables and statistics, is that the American economy has never reached its full capacity of production and consumption, and that both production and consumption should be tripled. It's a sort of laissez-faire argument which supposes that the American economy has always been artificially shackled by regulation and manipulation, and thus has never achieved its full flowering. Because the train on which Cendrars and Loeb are traveling is passing through the drab Midwestern and Prairie states, Cendrars has little choice but to listen to Loeb unspool his theory:

Pendant trois fois vingt-quatre heures, au fur et à mesure que le train s'enfonçait plus avant dans la Prairie dont le paysage, d'ailleurs gelé et à moitié recouvert de frimas à cette saison, est d'une désespérante monotonie pour un voyageur avide d'imprévu, je pus faire, grâce à mon ami, un tour d'horizon inoubliable, le pittoresque américain ne se déroulant pas à la portière du train qui nous emportait à toute vapeur, mais bien dans notre conversation ininterrompue et bourrée de chiffres.

(OC 4: 407)

Cendrars then leaves Loeb's statistics aside for a bit for a discussion of cars and pedestrians in Los Angeles (then, as now, "À Hollywood tout homme qui se promène à pied est un suspect," as the title of the next subsection informs us), and repeats that Hollywood is "une ville interdite," patrolled to the point that "tout homme qui ne va pas en auto est un suspect!" (OC 4: 408). He recalls that one night, after midnight, he was

stopped by police while walking back to his hotel from “une excellente soirée chez une amie, où je m’étais attardé” (OC 4: 408). Considering him suspicious because he’s on foot, the police insist on giving him a ride “pour me déposer 500 mètres plus loin à mon hôtel” (OC 4: 408). Then, he says, a few days later, he and some friends rode out into the countryside in an attempt to visit the ranch of actor William S. Hart, but are thwarted by police roadblocks designed to stem the tide of the seasonal invasion of migrant workers from neighboring states. He wonders whether all of this police activity might not be a foreshadowing of the entire state of California, and in particular the city of Los Angeles and the enclave of Hollywood within it, building its own version of the Great Wall of China in order to keep out undesirables. In a passage that today can be read as a chilling foretelling of today’s Trumpism, Cendrars writes:

Les trains sont visités. On arrête les vagabonds et les ouvriers agricoles qui sont sur le trimard. Les familles qui voyagent en auto sont impitoyablement refoulées si le chef de famille n’a pas de bonnes raisons suffisantes pour justifier son entrée libre en Californie. Les jeunes gens, les enfants, les femmes seules, les sans-travail, les infirmes, les malades ou les porteurs de germes d’une maladie infectieuse sont renvoyés dans l’État dont ils sont originaires ou internés dans des camps de concentration jusqu’à plus ample informé. Tout individu suspect est arrêté et envoyé en prison.

Cette *blockade* prend une allure de croisade contre tous les indésirables et les journaux locaux, pour excuser les vexations, les brimades et les injustices que de telles mesures exceptionnelles et souvent exagérées comportent, accusent les étrangers, ici des Mexicains qui franchissent par hordes la frontière sud, de venir manger le pain des chômeurs.

(OC 4: 410)

“A quand une muraille chinoise?” Cendrars asks. “Mais, au fait,” he answers, “cette muraille existe, elle entoure les studios, au cœur de la ville” (411). He will return to the notion of Hollywood as a walled city, and of the studios as walled compounds within that walled city, later in the book.

Before that, however, Cendrars returns to his conversation with Harold Loeb aboard the train hurtling across the Great Plains. The section is titled “L’utopie des H-P,” “H-P” being shorthand for “horsepower.” It’s in this section that the debate between Loeb, the technocrat, and Cendrars, the humanist, comes to a head. Loeb lays out his plan in great detail, using his book to support his argument. “Jusque-là j’avais suivi Harold attentivement,” writes Cendrars, “mais quand il se mit à parler de l’avenir, de l’abolition du paupérisme, de la maladie, du malheur, du mal, j’avoue que je fus tout à coup distrait” (OC 4: 412).

Cendrars is not an idealist, nor is he an adherent of any organized political system. Much like he resisted being lumped in with various artistic movements prior to the First World War, so too does he bristle at political orthodoxies that purport to have the answers

to all of humankind's problems. For him, all such systems miss an essential element, namely the human one, in all of its manifestations good, bad, and in-between:

Depuis sa publication le plan quinquennal des Soviets a fait tant de petits de par le monde que chaque fois que j'entends un de ces prophètes des « chevaux-vapeur » exposer devant moi son plan de réforme qui doit assurer le bonheur des citoyens, j'ai envie de m'écrier: « Mais laissez donc les Soviets travailler en paix! On verra bien si les camarades ingénieurs arriveront à éliminer de leurs engrenages la vieille perversité humaine qui fausse, qui déjoue tous les calculs!

(OC 4: 412)

Cendrars' comment is directed at the capitalist technocrats like Harold Loeb just as much as it is directed at the Marxists. He is, simply put, not a true believer on either side of that debate; nor is he a true believer in anything systematic, but rather in life itself, first and foremost, which is always messy and chaotic and foils and confounds every attempt to systematize it. At heart, he is perhaps as anarchist, though not an overtly political one.

In a long passage that serves as a retort to Loeb, though it is rendered in the form of an interior monologue rather than as words spoken out loud to Loeb as part of their dialogue, Cendrars clarifies his position, such as it is:

« Voyons, me disais-je, en regardant distraitemment le paysage toujours le même depuis Chicago, c'est-à-dire un paysage vide, où il n'y avait

exactement rien, mais rien à suivre des yeux, voyons, on ne peut pas condamner l'un pour faire l'apologie de l'autre, puisque le capitalisme et le communisme sont l'endroit et l'envers de la même question et que l'un ne va pas sans l'autre . . . Ce qui m'étonne, c'est depuis qu'on en parle tous ces beaux rêves chiffrés d'une meilleure répartition des richesses et d'une meilleure exploitation de la planète ne soient pas encore réalisés! Misère de l'homme . . . je suis sûr que chacun de ces idéologues est sincère et a raison; mais je suis également sûr et certain que cela ne se passera pas comme aucun d'eux ne le pense, car si l'économie se laisse à la rigueur diriger, la vie n'est pas logique, la nature ne fait pas de saut—et c'est pourquoi l'homme est impuissant et ne peut rien prévoir, puisque sa destinée n'est pas la fin, ni de la vie, ni de la nature . . . Ce raisonnement est scientifique . . . Alors, comment peut-on encore se laisser prendre au mirage d'une idéologie périmée? Tous les chiffres d'aujourd'hui et tous les « chevaux-vapeur » du monde moderne ne changent rien à la marche des affaires et à la destinée de l'homme . . . Quand les ingénieurs deviennent à leur tour prophètes et se mettent à délirer, ils ne fabriquent que de l'utopie . . . Le matérialisme dialectique est suranné . . . c'est justement pour avoir trop bien essayé de mettre en pratique les théories, certes désintéressés, mais combien folles (il me semble que nous l'avons payé assez cher pour le savoir, aujourd'hui!) des philosophes et des économistes du XVIII^e siècle, ces savants non-spécialisés, *amis du genre humain* comme ils s'intitulaient en s'adressant, non pas à leur seul pays

comme mon « technocrate » américain ou Staline, mais à tous les peuples de la terre, que le monde actuel se débat dans le pétrin où il est tombé »

(OC 4: 414-5)

For Loeb, the future is predictable via a series of mathematical calculations; for Cendrars, such a formula is not only deceptive and false but also pernicious. “Cela devient de l’escroquerie,” he writes, “car trop de gens s’adonnent aujourd’hui à ce genre de pythonisme. Loeb commençait à m’ennuyer sérieusement . . .” (OC 4: 415).

On the third day of their trip, the train passes through New Mexico, where Cendrars observes several adobe train stations, built in a faux-Mexican colonial style, and featuring Fred Harvey restaurants (“Fred Harvey, qui n’est pas seulement le plus grand cuisinier de l’Ouest, mais est aussi son manager bien moderne”), all of which are designed to attract tourists. Behind their facades, seemingly endless expanses of desert scrub. “C’est du bluff,’ pensais-je, ‘du bluff américain,’” Cendrars thinks, but is strangely dissatisfied with his take on what he sees at those lonely stations. At first, he cannot think of what they remind him of, then it comes to him: they are similar to “des fameux décors mobiles que le Prince Potemkin faisait dresser à l’horizon tout le long de l’itinéraire de sa souveraine . . .” But in this case, it isn’t Empress Catherine who is the target of the deception; it’s the American people themselves:

Quelle bonne plaisanterie! Mais qui avait-on voulu tromper ici, dans cette démocratie, sinon le peuple souverain, c’est-à-dire le citoyen américain,

l'homme le plus orgueilleux du monde et qui se prend volontiers pour le type exemplaire, le parangon, le phénix du XX^e siècle!

— Loeb, mon petit, lui dis-je, comme tous vos compatriotes, vous êtes victimes du décor. Tenez, regardez . . .

(OC 4: 415)

As the train pulls out of Lamy, New Mexico, with its station-hotel quaintly done up like “une auberge montmartroise dont l'entrée décorative, en stuc, mène à un jardinet stylisé” — in other words, a fake, a trompe-l'oeil — Cendrars sees a man in costume waiting in vain for travelers to whom he can give the stack of handbills he holds:

Et pour compléter l'illusion, un péteux, costumé en cow-boy et tenant des prospectus à la main, attendait des clients problématiques sur le quai de cette grande gare d'adobe, où personne n'était descendu.

Le dernier cow-boy dans un décor en carton-pâte planté dans le désert du Nouveau-Mexique!

Je garderai longtemps la vision de ce pauvre hère, debout dans des bottes éculées, qui clignait des yeux en regardant partir le train de luxe, et qui chiquait, et qui salivait au soleil.

— Avez-vous vu cet homme? demandai-je à mon ami. Lui avez-vous fait une place dans votre plan? Loeb, je crois que vos chiffres vous leurrent.

(OC 4: 415-6)

Loeb grows furious with Cendrars, and leaves the dining car where the two have been conversing. The train goes on to California. Cendrars tells Loeb where he's staying—the Garden of Allah Hotel¹²—but despite making tentative plans, Loeb never calls him and they never see one another again.

It is only then, almost halfway through his book, that Cendrars actually arrives in Hollywood. He notices walls and barriers everywhere, as befitting a “forbidden city.” Walls surround every studio, and many of the streets dead-end into walls eventually. There are also numerous walls within walls “qui délimitent plusieurs kremlins, qui défendent l'accès de plusieurs sérails” (OC 4: 418). Cendrars notices that in every wall surrounding a studio, there is an aperture, “le trou dans le mur,” and inside that tiny opening is the studio entrance, through which hundreds of people attempt to pass daily. But each entrance is closely guarded by a gatekeeper, the “cerbère du lieu” who keeps watch over the “antichambre à l'enfer de ce paradis artificiel qu'est le ciné!” (OC 4: 420). Cendrars visits various studios, including Universal (where *Sutter's Gold*, the film of his novel *L'Or*, has recently wrapped production, though he doesn't mention this), Paramount, United Artists, and M.G.M, and encounters various incarnations of this

¹² The Garden of Allah was a famous, even somewhat notorious Hollywood address for many film, musical, and literary celebrities. It was not a conventional hotel, and consisted of 25 freestanding “villas” arranged around a rather large property. It was open from 1927 to 1959. F. Scott Fitzgerald stayed there, as did Greta Garbo, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky, Bennie Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Frank Sinatra, among others.

“lunatique des concierges” at each one. At United Artists, he is allowed onto the studio backlot, but is given a confusing set of directions to his intended destination which results in his arrival at a well-appointed but completely empty office. His misadventures at the studios reinforce his sense of Hollywood as a closed-off world where access is available only to those who know certain passwords or otherwise have an “in.”

In the next section, titled “Nouvelle Byzance,” Cendrars again turns his attention to more general considerations of American culture, noting that

L’Amérique étant le pays de la quatrième dimension, tout y prend aussitôt des proportions telles que tout devient vertigineux et, par la multiplication d’un million de faits divers et des petits détails bien précis, taillés à facettes, qui se réfléchissent les uns les autres à l’infini et qui leurent à force de se répéter, la vie elle-même, en un rien de temps, semble y devenir irréaliste, un mythe.

(OC 4: 427)

If this was true in 1936—and surely it was—then it is even more true today. The multiplication of a million bits of news has now achieved a number in the billions, and the reflection and refraction of each bit has been exacerbated exponentially by the advent of social media and other such phenomena of which Blaise Cendrars could only dream. Here again, his take on Hollywood and the American media machine in general appears to be far ahead of its time, veritably visionary.

One effect of all of this endless distortion and multiplication of information, whether spawned by the Hollywood “dream factories” or by current-day news outlets, is that the masses become energized to the point of frenzy and turn their passions back on the sources from which the information flowed in the first place. Such riotousness necessitates the building of more and more walls, the isolation of enclaves in which the media can protect themselves and go about their business:

Le courant d'intérêts et d'enthousiasme humain déchaîné par le cinéma est devenu si menaçant pour Hollywood que Hollywood a dû prendre des mesures de défense inhumaines et disproportionnées pour endiguer ce délire entretenu par sa propre publicité, et c'est pourquoi tout n'est pas que bluff dans ce cercle vicieux.

Car le mur qui entoure chaque studio n'est pas seulement un mur symbolique, comme on pourrait le croire, un mur qui sépare la vie du rêve, le pays de la réalité d'un monde imaginaire, c'est aussi et véritablement un mur de pierres, sur les deux faces duquel se joue une double tragédie, typiquement américaine à cause du drame qui éclate dans une cascade d'épisodes souvent du plus haut comique.

...

A l'extérieur de l'enceinte, des flots d'hommes viennent battre le pied du mur et s'échouer à la porte des studios; à l'intérieur, des êtres illustres, célèbres certes, mais de chair et de sang, et captifs des studios, esclaves, et

dont beaucoup ne rêvent qu'à se libérer, ne demandent qu'à sortir, qu'à vivre.

(OC 4: 427-8)

As mentioned earlier, Blaise Cendrars' take on 1936 Hollywood resembles less what we might expect from a French correspondent than it resembles American writer Nathanael West's novel *Day of the Locust*, published just three years later (1939). Originally titled "The Cheated," West's novel begins and ends with riots, the first one staged for a movie and the last one quite real, taking place outside of a movie theater where a big premiere is occurring. For Cendrars, virtually everyone is cheated, the public and the movie stars alike; like West, he views the nearly infinite reproduction of cinematic images and the corollary peddling of sex and violence as corrosive to the human soul and to the spirit of the nation.

In that vein, Cendrars visits Los Angeles City Hall, where on the seventeenth floor he finds the office of the census bureau. Again, a report from a government office is surely not what the readers of *Paris-Soir* desired. There, he examines the records pertaining to suicides in Los Angeles. He discovers that it is the suicide capital of the United States. He reports the statistics grimly, matter-of-factly. When he asks the authorities for an explanation of this phenomenon, he is told that the high suicide rate is due to the California sun, "qui trouble facilement les cervelles" (OC 4: 430). This strange explanation contradicts the claims of the department of public health (and presumably of the chamber of commerce), which insists that the abundant sunshine is healthy and good for productivity. "*Venez en Californie — in the Sun-Kissed California!*," Cendrars writes,

quoting a well-known slogan, “ce qui pourrait être le début d’un hymne védique” (OC 4: 430). But Cendrars doesn’t blame the actual sunlight for the derangements of the suicidal:

Mais ne s’agit-il pas plutôt de ce soleil artificiel capté dans les studios de Hollywood, qui se rallume tous les soirs dans les salles de cinéma du monde entier, dont le fuseau animé, sonore, lumineux, mais chargé d’une lumière étrange, trouble en effet les cervelles et dont le tragique cône d’ombre vient invisiblement balayer Hollywood en plein jour et frapper au cœur, éclipse ou choc en retour, les désillusionnées et les stars?

(OC 4: 430)

The film industry has in a sense replicated the sun, but has squeezed their created light down to a beam, shaped it into a cone, and this artificial light on which the entire industry depends can be witnessed not only inside movie theaters, where the effect is obvious, but outdoors as well, taking the form of enormous spotlights sweeping the sky and summoning adherents of the cinema to the temples and palaces in which the sacred rites of premiere and red carpet and screening are enacted.

In the section “Les métamorphoses de l’idée,” which follows shortly after the section on suicide, Cendrars compares his own days in the film industry with the ways things are done in Hollywood in 1936. The most obvious change is the advent of sound—Cendrars worked with Abel Gance and others on silent pictures only—but he also details a Byzantine division of labor and compares it to his time making films, a time when all contributed according to their talents, their time, and their inclinations. The era of

specialization has now arrived, and he catalogues sixty eight separate departments that are required to produce even the most mundane of Hollywood films. These range from “Idea,” which is number one, to “Secretarial” (number twenty eight), to “Fire and Explosives” (forty five), to “Publicity” (sixty five) and “Exhibition” (sixty eight), with numerous other arcane jobs spread in between. Concerning “Idea” being at the top of the list, Cendrars writes:

Quel est le philosophe classique qui prétendait que les idées étaient faites pour être pensées et non pas pour être vécues? A Hollywood une industrie est née qui en vit et qui en fait vivre le monde—ce qui est la meilleure démonstration que cette Nouvelle Byzance est bien la capitale des temps modernes.

(OC 4: 441)

Hollywood is thus described as a force that transforms ideas into action without the mediating influence of thought, that manufactures a simulacrum of reality spawned from Idea, but Idea never fully cogitated upon, but rather delivered as a processed version of itself, given half-reality via projected light, never entirely real but not entirely imaginary either.

Perhaps Cendrars himself began to imagine things the longer he stayed in Hollywood; while on the set of the film *The Great Ziegfeld*, he becomes convinced that the scene he’s watching be filmed has been lifted from his 1927 novel *Le Plan de*

l'Aiguille. The plot of the movie and that of the novel have absolutely nothing to do with one another; instead, what strikes Cendrars is a particular tableaux that seems familiar:

LE CLOU DE LA « ZIEGFELD-FOLLIE » EST UNE PAGE
ARRACHÉE A MON ROMAN « LE PLAN DE L' AIGUILLE »

Ce qui se déroulait sous mes yeux, en une succession de tableaux éblouissants, étaient autant de scènes d'amour, de grâce, de joie, d'insouciance et d'innocence dont le développement était d'une poésie tout à la fois anecdotique et cosmique, historique et irréaliste et, malgré sa splendeur ineffable, toujours d'une profonde, d'une éternelle, d'une véritable humanité.

Aussi juger de ma stupeur quand à travers mon émotion je sentis poindre et se faire jour petit à petit la certitude d'avoir déjà assisté à ce spectacle et que je reconnus se concrétisant, se reconstituant, se matérialisant sous mes yeux qui ne pouvaient croire à ce prodige, parce qu'il se réalisait sur un autre plan, dans une ambiance sonore d'harmonies et toute pétillante des feux du studio, la page 89 de mon roman *Le Plan de l'Aiguille* où j'avais décrit, dix ans auparavant, et dans le silence du cabinet, un semblable monument de synthèse plastique et d'apothéose de la vie, page dont voici le texte:

« Une mêlée d'êtres cyclopéens constituaient le soubassement du monument. Des hommes perpendiculaires s'échappaient de cette mêlée, gravissaient le premier étage de la montagne, étreignant dans leurs bras musclés des femmes de toutes les races. Les femmes jaillissaient rieuses de leur étreinte, rieuses, légères, effarouchées. Comme un essaim de papillons ou d'oiseaux elles voltigeaient en spirale autour du monument dont elles atteignaient presque le faite. Mais ce sommet était renflé. Un nuage d'enfants joufflus s'y accrochait, des garçons et des filles qui tournaient et chantent. Au milieu de cette ronde était assis un adolescent. Il se levait. Il faisait le tour du sommet en s'élevant graduellement. Marche par marche, il montait, de face, de trois quarts, de dos. Toujours plus haut. Toujours plus haut. Enfin, il se détachait seul sur la vide. Il avait atteint le sommet: une boule, une sphère, un globe, une lampe, le soleil, — qu'il tentait d'arracher, de soulever et de maintenir, haut, très haut en l'air, à bout de bras, sans faiblir. Prométhée! »

Il est vrai que sur le plateau de la M.G.M. mon Prométhée était une adorable brunette, trônant dans les nues, avec des yeux sérieux, mais lumineux de bonheur comme les étoiles de la Croix du Sud qui s'éclaboussaient en passant derrière sa tête, et dont la riantes compagnes, qui faisaient la roue autour d'elle, étaient les reflets rayonnantes de sa beauté unique, ainsi multipliée du centre à l'infini.

(OC 4: 446-7)

Cendrars is thunderstruck by this experience at the M.G.M. studios. The incident doesn't demonstrate plagiarism on the part of the filmmakers, of course. Doubtless Cendrars includes it because it shows that he is no less subject to the power of the artfully rendered moving image than is anyone else; no amount of awareness of how the system operates will serve to shield him from its seductions. "Ici, ce n'est plus du cinéma que l'on fabrique dans ce studio," he writes in one of the book's last sections, "c'est de la haute mystique" (OC 4: 448). The reply from a script girl he meets on set? "Mystique, dis-tu? A Hollywood on dit *sex-appeal*, c'est plus sûr . . ." (OC 4: 448).

Cendrars ends the book in typically elliptical fashion, suggesting more to come, and also slyly suggesting that not everything we've read in Hollywood is necessarily true: "Mais ceci est une autre histoire, une histoire vraie, et non plus du cinéma" (OC 4: 467). He then closes in a manner with which he's closed other books, by listing places and dates; but instead of citing the dates and locations of the book's composition, as he had done with other works going as far back as "Les Pâques à New-York," the final page of Hollywood gives the itinerary of his departure from America and his circuitous journey back to France:

Departure (Aboard the *Wisconsin*): San Pedro, Champerico, San José-de-Guatemala, Acajutla, La Libertad, La Union, Corinto, Punta Arenas,

Cristobal, Saint Thomas (Virgin Islands), Corvo (The Azores), Le Havre
February 17 to March 19, 1936

(White 196)¹³

Though *Hollywood* is not one of Cendrars' better-known books, either in France or in the United States, it has obvious relevance for any study of Cendrars' American connections and writings. It's a strange book, but perhaps only strange for those unfamiliar with Blaise Cendrars. It bears all the hallmarks of his other work, especially his prose writings and reportage: dynamism, expansiveness of thought and word, surprise, and a keenly observed, idiosyncratic take on a subject we may have thought we were previously well familiar with. The book has just enough 'Hollywood' in it to at least pretend to entertain gossip-hungry readers of its time, and more than enough genuinely provocative and absorbing writing in it to hold the attention of more serious readers and scholars today.

¹³ This postscript is not reprinted in the 1962 Denoël edition of the *Œuvres Complètes*; thus I am citing the English-language translation of Garrett White.

CONCLUSION

Critical and biographical work on Blaise Cendrars, especially in the United States, is really only beginning. The Cendrars archives held at the Archives littéraires suisse in Bern, Switzerland are full of manuscripts, correspondence, and ephemera that has yet to be translated or otherwise made available outside of the Francophone world (and in many cases, not even there). Given Cendrars' interest in and relevance for American culture, there is good reason to think that his work would be of great interest here. A new set of translated American publications could introduce Cendrars to a whole new generation of American readers, a group that I believe would adopt his work enthusiastically. For instance, the tetralogy has never been published in English in its complete form, though truncated versions of the individual books have been. Nor have his volumes of short stories (*Histoires vraies*, *La Vie dangereuse*, and *D'Oulremer à Indigo*) seen the light of day in the United States, though individual stories have appeared here and there. Cendrars' most effective American advocates, John Dos Passos and Henry Miller, are themselves less and less frequently read, and their appeals to their fellow Americans to seek out Cendrars' writing have faded into history.

It is perhaps understandable that American readers and publishers would pass over the work of a French-language writer who died in 1961, or (as is likely the case) never have heard of him at all; but Cendrars' body of work offers so much that is relevant

to contemporary culture that it is hard to imagine that were they to take him up, the reading public wouldn't come away impressed. His insights on American life are pointed and prescient, in particular when it comes to the rise of mass media, social media, economic inequality, and isolationist politics. I believe that Blaise Cendrars would not be surprised by the current political and social situation in the United States—indeed, he in many ways seems to have long ago anticipated it. He is, however, not fundamentally pessimistic, nor does his work involve an unremitting critique of American life. In Cendrars' writing, there is also much in the way of an answer to the question of how to continue to live in a world we may well believe has gone mad. After all, he saw madness up close on the Western Front during the First World War, yet continued to live and even thrive. He saw clearly the pitfalls of American greed and of the dream state many Americans live in, perpetrated on them from Hollywood, and the ways in which glowing screens can seduce and impair us, but he also saw the great promise of America and admired the energy and ingenuity of the American people. Cendrars' answer to the problems of modernity isn't pat, nor easily summarized, but instead plays itself out over his entire body of work. It starts with a rejection of hard-set doctrines, and that rejection applies to artistic movements as much as it does to political parties. Cendrars urges us to always remain flexible of mind and capacious of heart and to as much as possible avoid being a "true believer." He calls on us to be adventurous and curious rather than sedate and self-satisfied. He advocates for a blend of contemplation and action, and described himself as a "Brahmane à rebours." He approaches the world with joy and good humor, and finds the foibles of his fellow human beings instructive and even edifying. He fabricates parts of his own life story not because he is an inveterate liar, but because he is

a creator par excellence, and always seeks to draw near the creative principle which he sees as the basis for all of reality. If his fabrications were made in service of self-aggrandizement alone, we'd likely find them objectionable—but because they serve a greater artistic purpose, and because the creative principle undergirds the entire body of his written work from his earliest publication to his last, most readers and critics readily forgive him. Besides, the tales he tells are undoubtedly interesting, and since all we have of him is his writing, and not the man himself, the line between truth and fiction in his self-created biography becomes a purely academic matter.

My work on Blaise Cendrars is far from finished. Most Cendrars devotees will say that once he has his hooks in you, it is nearly impossible to cut him loose. As a writer, he truly has no peers, which is to say that I know of no other writer comparable to him. One can certainly trace the influence his writing has had, but those writers influenced by him reflect that influence in piecemeal fashion; no one even approaches the oceanic, nearly-unclassifiable talent of Cendrars. Few if any write so well in so many different genres and modes. Few tell tales as interesting and moving, and few leave as profound an impact on others as Blaise Cendrars has. Those who knew him, who grow fewer and fewer with each passing year, still speak of him with respect bordering on reverence. Those who never knew the man but know the work find it *sui generis*, an endless trove of stimulation and provocation.

As soon as I have recovered from the toil of this dissertation—a labor of love, truly—I will turn my attention back to Cendrars, and engage upon the work yet undone.

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