Introduction

A LIFE

Blaise Cendrars was born in Paris, on the rue Saint-Jacques, or so he would have it in his last poem, *To the Heart of the World*. A poem has a license to lie, if we can call it lying, and Cendrars, in all his work from 1912 to 1961, continuously exercised that same right to construct a myth for himself. The problem that has always arisen is that readers, and possibly Cendrars himself, have taken the poetic myth as the mere transcription from life of his own real voyage. It thus becomes difficult to establish a "true" biography separate from a poeticized one; we have a body of ascertainable, and sometimes extraordinary, fact upon which to hang a motley of fantastical clothes, some fancy "stretchers" as Huck Finn called the inventions of his own author. Stretchers give breadth, myth, and, let us not forget, humor. Cendrars had all three in abundance, if readers will only follow, or swallow, for the fun of the chase and, in the end, the spiritual value of the adventure. So, Blaise Cendrars was born in a poem in Paris, in the building on the Left Bank where the *Romance of the Rose* was written; that was the medieval and urban parentage he wanted.

Before the myth, a boy named Frédéric Louis Sauser is born on 1 September 1887 in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, the third child of Georges Frédéric Sauser, merchant, and Marie-Louise Dorner. La Chaux-de-Fonds, near Neuchâtel, has been the center of the Swiss watch industry since the beginning of the eighteenth century. It is a small city, with streets set out at neat right angles and a population of upstanding burghers in the best Swiss tradition, except that it was also the home base for the great anarchist Kropotkin, who arrived about ten years before Freddy's birth. Though Cendrars may have had various connections to different stripes of anarchists in the last years before World War I, in both New York and Paris, his family background in La Chaux-de-Fonds and other Swiss cities is securely bourgeois. In any event, he is moved from this town in his infancy, possibly for a stay in Egypt. Certainly by the age of eight he and his family have moved to Naples.

Cendrars's life is full of voyages even before he learns to travel under his own steam. After Alexandria and Naples, with perhaps England and Paris in between, and after a failed attempt to be a good schoolboy at the local commercial school in Neuchâtel, he launches the grand adventure: a break with his parents, flight crisscrossing Germany, and the eventual landing in Saint Petersburg. Or, more realistically, his father despairs of his boy's truancy and entrusts him to the care of one H. A. Leuba, member of the small La Chaux-de-Fonds colony dealing in timepieces in the imperial Russian city. Freddy works for Leuba from 1904 to 1907, during which time he establishes a lifelong pattern of alternating travel with long sessions in libraries. He most probably travels at least to the famous Nijni-Novgorod fair and on the Trans-Siberian railroad, the subject of his second long poem. There seems little doubt that he witnesses various manifestations of the budding revolution: the devastated Russian troops returning on the Trans-Siberian from defeat at the hands of the Japanese at Port Arthur, Bloody Sunday in January 1905, and the general strike of that year. The Port Arthur debacle provides the background for his *Trans-Siberian* poem, while the 1926 novel *Moravagine* is full of the abortive insurrections in Saint Petersburg. Later texts tell of further travels in this period, to China, Armenia, and the mouth of the Lena; but some of these may be the travels of a reader, perhaps of Kropotkin's own explorations in eastern Russia, for example.

In 1907 Freddy returns to Switzerland, apparently ready to be "serious." He is at university in Basel, perhaps in Leipzig, then in Bern where he signs up for philosophy courses. But he seems to have broken with his father. In February of 1908 his mother dies. He studies music, and makes friends with a group of Polish students, among whom is one Féla Poznanska. In the summer of 1909 he may raise bees on a French farm; in April of 1910 he is an extra in *Carmen* in Brussels, and by October of that year he is in Paris, with Féla, on the rue Saint-Jacques. To make ends meet they translate letters and documents, and hope for longer manuscripts. He is now accumulating his own. He meets a few artists, including the young Marc Chagall, and gets to know a very seedy side of the city. But this first assault upon the bastion of art is a failure, for lack of funds; in March of 1911 Féla leaves to join relatives in New York, and the following month Freddy returns to Saint Petersburg. He gives language lessons and virtually lives at the library. He tries for a post as Pari-

sian correspondent for a Russian bank in order to return to Paris, but to no avail. Finally, Féla mails him a boat ticket for New York, where he arrives on 11 December 1911, on board the *Birma* out of Libau, which is to say with a boatload of immigrants from eastern Europe in steerage.

Freddy and Féla live for a while with her relatives in the Bronx, and later in an old wooden house on West Ninety-sixth Street, the last one left there at that time. They meet Caruso and see him sing Puccini, but generally Freddy finds far too little cultural activity to feed his huge hunger. If he discovers Stieglitz's Little Galleries at 291 Fifth Avenue, it is to find that the real new work is being done back in Paris. He submits to menial jobs he manages to hold for a few days at a time, such as pianist in a Bowery movie-house, but he can sustain no interest in making a living, only in reading, doing his own inventories of modern French and German art, and writing at the brand-new Forty-second Street library. It is a time of oppressive poverty, described later by Cendrars as the worst period in his life (yet his is a life of chronic poverty, in which windfalls disappear in a day). Féla teaches, at first, at the Ferrer School, an anarchist center founded by Emma Goldman and others, and Freddy no doubt meets some of the artists and writers who are getting their start there. But John Sloan and George Bellows are not doing work that can attract a budding European modernist (and Man Ray probably does not attend the Ferrer studio until after it moves in the fall of 1912). The school's director is a young Will Durant (Ariel is a fifteen-year-old student) and all the talk is of European writers, Maeterlinck for example. Freddy is desperate for a way past this sort of neosymbolism, and there is little doubt that the city itself, rather than the culture it wishes to ape, is the strongest new influence on him, as distasteful as that may seem. The first city of modernity introduces, then, the poet's first important poem, *Easter in New York*. It is also the site of a rebirth; Freddy takes on the name of Blaise Cendrars, this burning phoenix apparently rising out of a few smoldering lines of Nietzsche: "And everything of mine turns to mere cinders / What I love and what I do." After a stay of about six months he leaves again for Paris, via Switzerland, armed with a poem and a name, but without Féla.

From now through August of 1914, for a period of about two years, Cendrars participates in what must be the most promising avant-garde period in history. He works on projects with Guillaume Apollinaire and

has poems published in his magazine *Les Soirées de Paris*. He publishes *Easter in New York* himself, as a special number of *Les Hommes Nouveaux*, a semianarchist review he starts with Emil Szittya, as well as the magnificent two-meter-high *Prose of the Trans-Siberian*, printed vis-à-vis Sonia Delaunay's abstract painting. Among Cendrars's best friends are Fernand Léger and Chagall; he supplies titles for the latter's paintings. Robert and Sonia Delaunay often treat him to dinner; the three, along with Arthur Cravan, the pre-Dadaist who billed himself as the nephew of Oscar Wilde (and he was, though no one believed it) and the world's greatest poet-boxer (he fought Jack Johnson, ignominiously, in 1916 in Spain) would then go to Bal Bullier dances in "modern" attire dipped in painters' colors. There are poems for Roger de La Fresnaye, Alexander Archipenko, Léger and Chagall, and friendships with other painters at the studios for poor artists called La Ruche: Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Joseph Csaky, Moise Kisling, and Cendrars's best wandering and drinking companion after the war, Modigliani, who has left us some five or six portraits of the poet. Many of these painters do art work for Cendrars's books and are in turn the writer's subjects. He participates in exhibits and readings from Saint Petersburg to Berlin, polemics with poetasters, projects for little magazines, concerts such as the première of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, in May 1913, where one result of the ruckus is that Cendrars spends the night with an orchestra seat for a collar. It is an exhilarating period of adventurous creation. It is also a period of great poverty for all these now-famous people, something we should try not to overromanticize. Cendrars is among the poorest, and unable to manage even the few francs that come his way; he splurges and sponges, sometimes eats and sometimes prefers to print his own poems. In that month of May Féla rejoins Blaise in Paris. *Panama* and *Elastic Poems* (at that point only seventeen) are written, but then war will postpone any possibility of immediate publication. Féla and Blaise have their first son, Odilon, born in April of 1914. One would have expected the world to be opening up rather than closing down, but everyone can see war coming. Blaise and his friend the Italian poet and editor Ricciotto Canudo draft an appeal, published in the newspapers on 29 July 1914, calling for all foreigners to enlist on the side of the French. A few days later he is on his way into the Foreign Legion, "First Foreign Regiment of Paris." Before he leaves for the front in September he and Féla marry,

largely because of the rising xenophobia she is already being subjected to in her little suburban town. Now her baby has a real "poilu," a soldier for a father, one who is quickly marched off to Frise, then Herbécourt. In May of 1915 he survives the attacks in Artois, where 100,000 are lost in the month. Carency cemetery, the Bois de la Vache, Vimy Ridge, Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Givenchy; a list of glorious disasters in the hopes of a few feet of no-man's-land and a few inches in the Parisian dailies. The four foreign regiments sustain such enormous losses that the remnants are transferred to "la Marocaine," the original and most famous Foreign Legion. At Souchez the Marocaine division suffers half of all the losses for the whole of the Tenth Army. Sainte-Marie-les-Mines, then Roye, where there is some relief, and then a two-week leave for Paris in July. Roye again, then the assault of the Navarin Farm in Champagne where, on 28 September 1915, Cendrars loses his right arm.

So he has to learn to write all over again, passing the pen over to his left hand. He is astonished to discover that the same day he loses his arm his greatest literary hero, Remy de Gourmont, dies. Despite the pain and sense of loss his amputation causes him throughout his life, he is private and discreet about it in his work. For example, a full volume entitled *La Main coupée* (literally, the severed hand) does not discuss his own arm, though he is himself on stage at war throughout. The left hand becomes, in the signature to letters, his familiar "la main amie," the friendly hand.

Paris in 1915 is deserted culturally, but one by one artists and writers drift back (many are in self-imposed exile, dodging the draft like Duchamp and Picabia in New York). Cendrars finishes earlier poems and writes stunningly surrealistic prose pieces such as *Profound Today*, to be published as small pamphlets. He reinvolves himself, in poetry readings and concerts at the Salle Huyghens with Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and Pierre Reverdy, or Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and Francis Poulenc. But, after a year or so in the avant-garde, Cendrars prefers to leave Paris to its cliques. In 1917 he is living in the countryside with Féla and his two sons, near Méréville. He writes surreal texts like *The End of the World Filmed by the Angel of Notre-Dame* in a barn among the watercress fields, where he works for the wives of farmer-soldiers at the front. He also frequents the families of gypsies he met in the Legion. A chapter a month of the visionary *L'Eubage* gets him 100 francs apiece from the couturier Jacques Doucet, who is already collect-

ing avant-garde manuscripts. Nineteen-seventeen is also the year he begins to see less and less of Féla; in Paris he meets Raymone, a young aspiring actress who becomes the moral center of his life. He also goes to Cannes and works in film, a career he dreams of sporadically for a number of years. His first work is with Abel Gance's *J'accuse*. He recruits mutilated veterans to play the final scene in which he rises with them from the battlefield to show the civilians what they have wrought. Then he is assistant director on Gance's *La Roue*, hiring Honegger for the music and probably having a decisive influence on the radical fast cutting the film is best remembered for. In 1920 he starts to make his own film in Rome, but his star has a serious accident, and financial manipulators bankrupt the studio he is working in.

Meanwhile Cendrars becomes the artistic director of La Sirène editions, where, with the help of Jean Cocteau, he publishes the moderns alongside their progenitors, such as Lautréamont and de Gourmont. He is receiving his first recognition in English, with *I Have Killed* in *The Plowshare*, the literary magazine of the artists' colony at Woodstock, New York, and various translations in *Broom*, the most luxurious of the American expatriate little magazines. He has the reputation of being the main purveyor of African culture in Paris and writes the scenario for Milhaud's *The Creation of the World*, with sets and costumes by Léger. Another scenario, with music by Satie and sets by Francis Picabia, is left in manuscript; Picabia replaces it with his famous *Relâche*. The incident is emblematic of Cendrars's pre-Dada role and how he played it; typically, instead of defending his participation, he leaves again, this time for South America.

Originally invited by the Brazilian *modernistas* as their model for a modern poet, Cendrars lectures on language in São Paulo and explores the plains and jungles, participating if not actually leading in the discovery of the country by its indigenous poets in search of roots. He will travel to South America five times between 1924 and 1930. Meanwhile, and ironically, he has himself abandoned writing poetry. The complete poetry, as represented in this volume, was written in twelve years of revolutionary activity, from 1912 to 1924. Cendrars now turns to novels, the first of which, *Sutter's Gold* (1925), is written with the same directness of style we find in his "documentary" poems, such as *Kodak*. In *Sutter's Gold* Cendrars rediscovers the forgotten figure of General Sutter, the

Swiss adventurer who founded an agricultural empire in northern California only to see it collapse when gold is discovered on his own land. This most accessible of Cendrars's prose works will eventually be translated into fifteen languages. The following year *Moravagine* appears, Cendrars's most famous novel. It recounts the hallucinatory voyages of a madman and his doctor-observer through the early upheavals of the century, from Russian revolution to World War I. It is as if Moravagine himself, though but a single ingenious and gleefully vicious consciousness, is the instigator of all chaos, whether in Berlin or the Amazon jungle. Finally, to continue the composition by threes initiated with the epic poems of 1912–1914, a third novel, *Dan Yack* (1929), appears in two very distinct volumes: the first follows Dan Yack's adventures and survival in Antarctica, the second shows him recording his memories in a small, snowbound hut in the French Alps. A double novel of the cold, yet the warmest and most openly personal of the early novels, with the clearest portrayal of a view of life made up of alternating and complementary action and contemplation.

Cendrars begins the thirties covering the trail of Jean Galmot for *Vu* magazine, the result being *Rhum* (1930), his first reportage. The thirties are, for him, mainly news work, or novelistic writing on documentary subjects: editorial or translation jobs on Al Capone and O. Henry, unfinished novels on Jim Fiske and John Paul Jones; a 1935 volume on the underworld throughout France; a 1936 volume on Hollywood, which must be one of the first models for those ironic tours of famous places where one continually fails to meet the important people. Always attracted to the marginal, he covers the first crossing of the *Normandie* for *Paris-Soir* but reports only on the hold and its workers (Colette and others write about first class). The Hollywood book is the product of his trip for the film première of *Sutter's Gold*, in which James Cruze (of *Covered Wagon* fame) has directed Edward Arnold and Binnie Barnes. The project has been in the works since 1930, when Eisenstein negotiated with Cendrars in Paris, but the American studio never let the Russian make a film. The final version, in which we no longer see the hand of one of its early scriptwriters, William Faulkner, is without interest, as Cendrars well knows.

From about 1924 to the Second World War, and when he is more or less stationary in France, Cendrars lives mostly in a small town outside

of Paris called Le Tremblay-sur-Maudre, where Picabia and the art dealer Vollard are his neighbors. Another neighbor is Jacques-Henry Lévesque, who publishes *Orbes*, a last Dada-spirit journal that features Cendrars, Picabia, and Duchamp above all others. Lévesque will be the first to publish an anthology of Cendrars's work (1944) and first to write a book on him (1947). Cendrars might also be in Biarritz staying with his Peruvian friend and benefactress Eugenia Errazuriz; John Dos Passos finds him nearby in Montpazier and returns to the States with his translations of Cendrars's poetry, *Panama* (1931), an elegant and rare volume with the American's watercolors. Cendrars also has a Paris address, the Alma-Hôtel, and makes short forays into town. In December of 1934, for example, he ferrets out Henry Miller and is the first important writer to congratulate him, in person and then in print, for *Tropic of Cancer*.

Near the end of the thirties Cendrars returns to fiction, or at least to a renewed amalgam of fiction and documentary, in three volumes of short pieces that can for convenience be classified under the generic title of the first, *Histoires vraies* (*True Stories*). These tales, presented as witnessed truths, are the early models for his post–World War II fictions (again, radical writing to be interrupted by a war). In 1939 he is a war correspondent for a consortium of French newspapers and travels to Britain, reports from a British submarine, and is attached to British headquarters in France. As war breaks out he is in Belgium, then Lille, Arras, Amiens, and Paris. A great photograph dated 12 May 1940 shows him in a boxcar, reclining on his good arm atop the evacuated gold reserves of the Bank of France, 280 million francs' worth. He is in flight by car through the Loire valley, thence to Marseilles where he is arrested for his English "uniform." His reportage, *Chez l'Armée anglaise* (*With the English Army*), is interdicted by the Germans in Paris, and he settles down to a secretive and apparently inactive life for the duration in Aix-en-Provence.

From July 1940 through August 1943 Cendrars writes nothing. He is reading a great deal in the works of the church fathers in the town's famous Méjanes Library. There are plenty of hints he may be assisting Resistance groups, since the militia men come after him several times and wreck his car. He helps the filmmaker Max Ophuls and his family out of the country (the young son later makes *The Sorrow and the Pity*). But, in the first years of this war, he seems paralyzed as a writer, unless perhaps he is busy doing things we do not know about. Then, suddenly

after three years of silence, and with no sign whatever of tentativeness, he launches into the four volumes of memoirs that make up the great achievement of his maturity.

Of the four, only the second, *La Main coupée* (1946; *Lice*) can be considered reasonably straightforward narrative. The three others, *L'Homme foudroyé* (1945; *The Astonished Man*), *Bourlinguer* (1948; *Planus*), and *Le Lotissement du ciel* (1949; presently being translated) wrench time and place out of their old orders, to mix and reassemble them into a vast, exteriorized panorama of the self in the twentieth century. This autobiographical saga, as it has been called for lack of a more precise term, is alternately truculent and full of humor about Cendrars's obsessions and those of innumerable other formidable characters he has met (and created). In the finale, *Le Lotissement du ciel*, he plunges backward into his past to free his spirit, and our own, to "levitate" with the saints who were inspired enough to fly in the skies.

The last decades of Cendrars's life are less rushed. After marrying Raymone in 1949 in the Swiss village of his paternal family (Féla died during the war, in England), he settles for good in Paris. There are reprints of older works to oversee: *Dan Yack* finally in one volume in 1951; a third edition of *Moravagine* in 1956 with its invaluable "Pro Domo" epilogue on how the book was written; the complete poetry in 1957 (after a first 1947 volume entitled *Poésies complètes*), under the fine title *Du Monde entier au coeur du monde*. There are radio plays, introductions, interviews, notably a thirteen-part series for radio later published in 1952 as *Blaise Cendrars vous parle* (*Blaise Cendrars Speaks*); this volume constitutes the author's last version of his life as myth, or as suspect truth. Cendrars works on a number of fiction projects: one on the *Carissima* (Mary Magdalena), which would have paralleled *Le Lotissement* in many ways, and, the only project to see the day, *Emmène-moi au bout du monde! . . .* (1956; *To the End of the World*). This scabrous account of the exploits of an old actress, Thérèse, and her legionnaire lover, Jean de France, is a detective story without a solution and a roman à clef that impinges uncomfortably on the lives of certain Parisian notables. *Emmène-moi* is a vigorous and youthful tumble after the high-flying double levitation of Saint Teresa and Saint John in the *Lotissement*.

In 1956 and 1958 Cendrars suffers strokes that leave him partially paralyzed. At the end of 1958 André Malraux comes to Cendrars's apart-

ment on the rue Jean-Dolent to give the much-diminished author the award of commander of the Légion d'Honneur. Over the next year he produces only a few scribbled pages of new work. In January of 1961 he is awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de Paris. Perhaps these prizes at the end of his life are a consolation, or perhaps they are a disappointment, a reminder of past neglect. He dies on 21 January 1961, at the age of seventy-three, having lived to see three of the eight volumes of his complete works appear in a fine hardcover edition from Denoël; this is, I am sure, a better way to end, a sign that his readers can begin to take his work seriously.

THE POETRY

Cendrars's early poetry is written under the influence of Remy de Gourmont's *Latin mystique*, a book that provided medieval models for a young poet attempting to escape the then current mode of neosymbolism. However, de Gourmont was also a supporter of precisely that same sort of heavily symbolic interior groping which was the model of the time, as in the work of Maeterlinck for example, who received the Nobel Prize for literature about the time Cendrars stepped off the boat in New York. Cendrars's earliest poems, *Séquences* (1912), are the product of this double influence, via the single conduit of de Gourmont, with their Latin liturgical title and running epigraphs, and their self-conscious, exacerbated sexuality. These twenty-five short poems, which Cendrars chose never to republish, detail the frustrated relationships of hands, mouths, breasts, and bellies as the speaker probes for what he calls in one of the poems an "interior nudity."

But this sort of narcissistic eroticism, with its forced imagery, soon must have appeared to Cendrars to be a dead end, while the plainer diction speaking of simpler, more outward subjects of de Gourmont's Latin fathers was a natural medium for rendering the modern world just opening up for a poet in 1912, especially in New York. In *Easter in New York*, the religious theme is brought to the fore in its contrast with the victimization of immigrant populations piling up in lower Manhattan, and of course it is already foregrounded in the title, which tells us the crucial day of the poem, and in the epigraph from the Latin in which the wood of the cross is implored to relent its pull on Christ's body. Mean-

while, Cendrars walks a dangerous tightrope, for a modernist, with the close identification of the speaker-poet and the Christ. Part of the success of the poem is in the fact that the poet, ultimately, is *not* Christ, but instead is always measuring his own failure to sympathize sufficiently against the infinite compassion of a Jesus who, repeatedly, will not function for a modern world. The desperate or exhausted repetition of the poem's last line is testimony to the failure and the painful consciousness of the distance between savior and poet: "I stop thinking about you. I stop thinking about you."

Easter in New York was new, in 1912, in its return, or at least in its beginning of a return, to the use of a common, spoken language for poetic lyricism. There are only a few sporadic—maybe even accidental—examples of such diction in *Séquences*, but *Easter in New York* employs it throughout. There are in fact barely any occasions given over to metaphor. Most of the poetic flights in the poem are about a symbolic, religious code that is lacking in this world, a world this new poem is resolved to contend with; as if to say metaphor itself is ailing for lack of belief or relevance and is not to be trusted.

Remnants of the medieval impulse survive in *The Trans-Siberian*, in the "Prose" of the title in French (after the low Latin *prosa*, as Cendrars explained it; a sort of speaking forth, which he considered less pretentious and confining), and in such lines as "I foresaw the coming of the big red Christ of the Russian Revolution," where a new ideology usurps an older figure. But the brash and violent originality of this long poem successfully obscures its antecedents. The format alone was spectacular; a fold-out sheet six and a half feet tall, with the poem on the right in multiple typefaces and different colored inks, and on the left a full length *pochoir* (a sort of silk screen), an abstraction by a then unknown Sonia Delaunay. A projected 150 copies were advertised as equaling, at two meters a copy, the height of the Eiffel Tower, which is invoked in the last line of the poem and at the very bottom of the painting. But presumably nowhere near that many were actually completed, and a copy is rare enough to have been sold in 1991 for $100,000. It is first a poem for the eyes, though it can hardly be read in the glance that would take it all in at once (its first public reading was by a friend who, candle in hand, had to start on a chair and end on her knees); *The Trans-Siberian* is not only one of the first truly modern poems, but a modern multimedia object as well.

The influence of Whitman, along with that of Rimbaud, is apparent in the break with all rules of regular line length, beat, or rhyme. The poem's lyricism resides in how the line is allowed to breathe, sometimes in a syllable, sometimes in twenty-four or more. In complete control of the typography and using the full width of a seven-inch page, Cendrars preferred to set almost all of his extended "breaths" on one long line. Many blocks of print are justified only at the right-hand margin, and numerous sections are highlighted by font size and position on the page. He uses repetition and refrain, but makes almost no other concessions to traditional poetic form. After the incantatory rhyming of the first three lines, two nice exceptions are the ironic twenty-line section, sometimes rhyming, sometimes assonant, on the prostitute as a bodiless flower, and the following couplet that flashes a rhyme for a poet's name while declaring that these new poets have lost the ability to rhyme:

> "Pardonnez-moi de ne plus connaître l'ancien jeu des vers"
> Comme dit Guillaume Apollinaire
>
> ("Pardon my forgetting how to play the ancient game of Verse"
> As Guillaume Apollinaire says.)

The poem is full of admitted failures, both at braving the perils that engulf everyone around the narrator and at expressing adequately in poetry the furious state of the world: "I don't know how to take it all the way," runs one refrain, and that applies equally to the job of living and the job of writing. *The Trans-Siberian* is certainly a heroic poem, even an epic one despite its compression into 420 lines, but the hero is carried along, submits, resists, sympathizes, and flees, so he is hardly the master of his adventure. The poem alternately fragments and reassembles the self, the prostitute Jeanne, the war, and the desolate landscape into a moving cubist and expressionist vision of a painful new world; this is a poem which, physically, cleaves to its twentieth-century contents.

In *Panama*, the third and last long poem of these early years, 1912–1914, fragmentation is still greater, as there is no longer the train and its long, straight trip to focus the action. *Panama* doesn't so much tell the adventures or stories of seven uncles—plus one narrating "nephew"—as it embodies their yearning back to a family home in Eu-

rope from all corners of the earth. Again Cendrars's format is novel, both fun and to the point. The soft cover of the original edition is folded vertically to constitute both front and back of the volume. It copies an old Union Pacific train schedule and invites casual pocketing. Within the text of more than five hundred lines, Cendrars reproduced, as stanza breaks, the schematic train routes from the American schedule, in seemingly endless variations on the Chicago to Los Angeles or San Francisco routes, as if the many voyages of the poem itself were the multiplied variations of the same wanderlust and inevitable homesickness. Also reproduced in the poem is a first stab at found poetry: Denver, Colorado's full-page advertisement for itself, sandwiched between the lines, "You go under the Eiffel Tower—looping the loop—to come down on the other side of the world" and "Then you go on." In *Panama*, we meet, we leave, then we blend, in our minds, the places we visit so quickly that the idea of a voyage recedes leaving in its place the sense of all places coexisting simultaneously.

The language of *Panama* is as far as possible from the high rhetorical style inherited by the poets of the early 1900s. Arguably Cendrars's lines are not (and are not trying to be) "beautiful." Instead, objects, names, advertisements, book titles, and conversations replace higher sentiments or ideas about such things. It is a poetry of presentation, with emotion held in reserve behind the rapid-fire juxtaposition of the wide world's quotidian. Poetry is declared to flow not from high-blown musings but from financial fiascos like France's attempt to build the Panama Canal: "Stock Market quotations are our daily prayers." In such manner the poem asserts its place in the world, yet sails easily clear of lecturing on poetics or the lessons of history. The scattered histories of the seven uncles bring the wide, hard world to bear on the private anguish of a yearning, uprooted child. Eventually the uncles come to weigh very heavily upon the narrator, who is alternately a young boy shunted from school to school and country to country and a young adult pursuing his fate in the wake of lost family. This Cendrars-like person comes, at the end of the poem, to a temporary rest in Paris (again and always Paris with Cendrars), poised for a moment, before his compulsion to renew himself in wandering imposes itself once more, even to travel beyond the possible:

Suns moons stars
Apocalyptic worlds
You all still have a good role to play
. . . . . .
I'd like to be a fifth wheel.

Most of the *Nineteen Elastic Poems* were written at the same time as *Panama* and published in small international avant-garde magazines: for example, number 4 as late as February 1914 in the Berlin *Der Sturm*, and numbers 13, 16, and 17 in the July-August 1914 issue of *Les Soirées de Paris*. Like *Panama*, the poems had to await the end of the war for their appearance as a volume, at which point, in 1919, Cendrars added two more (19 poems to match 1919); this was one of their elasticities.

The physical presentation of the poems was not avant-garde (though there was a portrait of the author by Modigliani), and thus, aside from the lack of rigor threatened in the title, Cendrars seemed to be announcing a return to more conventional modes. Of course, in the context of the proliferating productions of an avant-garde that everyone knew he had himself pioneered, this deceptive appearance was another striking move against the grain. The radical practices of *Nineteen Elastic Poems* had immediate effect in the avant-garde, in their modest magazine appearances and even in manuscript, since two were first published without Cendrars's knowledge: one in *De Stijl*, in the Netherlands, another in *Le Cabaret Voltaire*, the one-issue founding magazine of Dada in Zurich. Essentially, Cendrars had driven his modernization of diction and subject matter to one of its logical outcomes, to write "occasional" poems of Parisian life in colloquial language. This does not mean the poems are simple, or easy to understand; often the contrary is the case. Much of the context for a conversation in a café, and the processes which ought to link comments and images, are missing, dismissed in favor of an immediate if confusing sense of our presence on the scene. Some of the poems are so entirely embedded in precise events as to have become obscure within a few years, or even months.*

*We are deeply indebted to Jean-Pierre Goldenstein for his meticulous searches after the almost lost references and sources. The notes Ron Padgett has appended to his translations reflect this research.

The sense of an authentic, personal voice in conversation is overwhelming in *Nineteen Elastic Poems:* fresh, enthused, private or confiding, bemused or poignant, always, it seems, undisguised:

> It's useless not wanting to talk about yourself
> You have to cry out sometimes

Certainly it is oddly intimate to hear "I" admit so naturally to being the poet himself at his writing desk:

> Christ
> It's been more than a year now since I stopped thinking about you
> Since I wrote my . . . poem *Easter*

These poems, like the previous ones, are filled with references to the books of others, but the sense is hardly "intertextual" or erudite when the poem reads, "There is also one pretty page," and proceeds to quote from it.

"Une jolie page" is a good tag for Cendrars's most radical elasticizing of the concept of poetry; number 10, "News Flash," is probably the first found poem, copied (with some changes) from a Parisian daily. At one stroke Cendrars anticipates Duchamp's ready-mades and goes well beyond collage in the undermining of romantic ideas of originality. *Nineteen Elastic Poems* is a first primer of found, cubist, assemblage, and collage techniques, all put to relevant use and variation. Another poem, "Mee Too Buggi," is also found, with the exception of its opening line and the fact that it doesn't explicitly admit to its "other," Tonga origin. In that poem the swiped material is odd to Western eyes because its point of view is so foreign to Western culture; the poem is an extraordinary act on Cendrars's part of decolonializing perception.

But what struck readers of *Nineteen Elastic Poems* first was the modern subject matter, presented with engaging enthusiasm even though the poet did not seem duped by progress. Trains, radios, machines, advertising, headlines, pop culture, had already appeared in other work, but never with this concentration. Modernity occupies the foreground entirely in these short, nonnarrative lyrics, matching subject to novel treatment perfectly. I don't think this is contradicted even by the Tonga poem "Mee Too Buggi," in which modernist form demonstrates its sources in so-called

primitivism. The poems were new inside and out, like the poet reborn to the newness of a world rushing ahead with no regard for culture as a civilizer.

Only two further volumes of poetry would appear, both in 1924: *Kodak (Documentaire)*, with a portrait by Picabia, and *The Formosa*, which is part one of *Feuilles de route* (*Travel Notes*), with a drawing by the Brazilian artist Tarsila. Though other parts of *Travel Notes* appeared in reviews through the latter half of the twenties, 1924 remains the latest dating of any of them, so we may mark that year as the end of Cendrars's life as a poet, after which time he wrote only prose. Perhaps *Kodak* and *Travel Notes* represented a culmination and a finale in his mind; certainly he had put poetry in a very special corner, far away from expressionist lyricism, from literary movements and trends, removed from any grandiose claims to eternal and beautiful art which might reflect back upon the eternal fame of the creating artist.

Still, *Kodak* has its great, if unpretentious, beauties. It has its affinities to travelogue, even more obvious in *Travel Notes*, but of a sort far from either exalted exoticism or Michelin's tour of historical monuments. The poems are made almost entirely of description, quite eventless, like snapshots in a family album. We flip the pages but make few profound links. Each poem is largely mute, showing without saying much, while just below these surfaces of heat, rain, and mud, of cool bungalows, unfamiliar birds, trees, flowers and fish, lies an odd sort of secret quotidian; a strange one, someone else's, as if only the American (or Japanese) knew what it was we were being shown, and only Cendrars knew how to write it down without overinterpreting it. And at the same time, as I have said, it does not seem to add up, especially with the elephant hunt near the end in which it seems the huge beast in the jungle is always getting away, right next to you! The finale of eight stunning and weird menus constitutes an unexpectedly sublime ending to the album, a magical decantation of all the disparate localities that have supplied the travelogue's poems. Yet, should not menus come beforehand? As with any menu, you cannot possibly eat it all, from "Truffled green turtle liver" through "Canadian bear ham" and "Cream of silkworm cocoon" to "Hedgehog ravensara." The menus are also an index, a parting taste to save as a reminder of the variety and strangeness of experience, and a parting invitation to reopen the album when the right hunger strikes.