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"Redoubtable Blaise Cendrars Returns"

Gold
Blaise Cendrars
translated by Nina Rootes
Peter Owen Ltd.
128 pages, $24.25 Paper
ISBN: 072061175X

Dan Yack
Blaise Cendrars
translated by Nina Rootes
Peter Owen Ltd.
144 pages, $26.95 Paper
ISBN: 072061157-1

Confessions of Dan Yack
Blaise Cendrars
translated by Nina Rootes
Peter Owen Ltd.
120 pages, $26.95 Paper
ISBN: 072061158X

by Jeff Bursey

In *The Astonished Man* (1945), the first volume of a memoir tetralogy, Blaise Cendrars relates how in the spring of 1927 he rented a chateau named l'Escayrol in the French fishing village of La Redonne, in which to complete the Dan Yack stories. He set up his typewriter and wrote the first three lines of the last chapter, "by way of welcome and to wish myself 'good work' in this house... These were the sole, the only lines I was to write at l'Escayrol..." The poet André Gaillard visits the chateau on business occasionally and adds to the manuscript with each stay. Cendrars says those lines remain "embedded in [the] text," which was published in 1929. This is a miniature example of how Cendrars rendered his life in print. The memoirs—which one critic calls "autobiographical novels"—are fabulous for what is recounted, what is left out, what is altered, and for their style. The product of a mature writer, their appearance was preceded by three decades of influential and robust poetry and fiction.

Cendrars, born Frédéric Sauser (1887-1961), does not have a wide audience today in the English-speaking world, though his advocates include Kathy Acker, John Dos Passos and Henry Miller. Unable to neatly classify his work, academics have generally settled for calling him a sport, a term which is at once vague and exclusionary. In Europe his visibility is not in peril. Publication of his early poetry (1912-1915) in France generated attention immediately. In telegraphic lines influenced by science, travel, revolution and advertising, Cendrars showed the modernizing, progressive impulses he witnessed in Berlin, Moscow and New York, where the

present and immediate future promised new and exciting machines, inventions, skyscrapers and attitudes. The first poems—"Easter in New York" (1912) and "The Prose of the Transsiberian" (1913), among others—were not naive nor Futurist love letters to technology, but instead balanced the excitement of fresh discoveries with an awareness that scientific progress did not automatically mean humanity's advancement. They established Cendrars as a vibrant figure whose valuable insights and literary devices had been gathered on three continents.

His social circle included fishermen, restaurateurs, film-makers and eccentrics. He could count as friends or acquaintances Apollinaire, Braque, Chagall, Delaunay, Jacob, Léger, Modigliani, Picabia and Picasso. Cendrars chatted freely with anarchists whom he met in bars or on his travels, and their systems, plans and natures were immortalized in the harrowing novel *Moravagine*. Comrades from the Foreign Legion during the First World War became close, if not always permanent, friends, and they figure prominently in the tetralogy and his last novel, *To the End of the World* (1956).

A Swiss-German who adopted France as his homeland, Cendrars joined the Legion when war broke out, and lost his right arm (his writing arm) in September 1915. Despite this devastating injury—Hemingway coldly said he and others felt "that Cendrars might well be a little less flashy about his vanished arm"—he quickly resumed writing poetry, such as "The War in the Luxembourg Garden" (1916). From then until the middle of the 1950s something appeared by him, in one language or another, almost every year, in addition to his activities as a film-maker (with Abel Gance) and as a publisher. /**18**/ *Panama, or The Adventures of My Seven Uncles* (1918, written in 1913/14) earned him more acclaim as a poet, and Dos Passos, who dubbed Cendrars the Homer of the Transsiberian, translated it in 1931.

In the 1920s Cendrars lost interest in poetry. He felt fiction was the genre that could hold his ideas, and in six years five novels appeared: *Gold* (1925), *Moravagine* (1926), *Dan Yack* (1927), *Confessions of Dan Yack* (1929), and *Rhum* (1930; not in English).

Rarely out of print, *Gold, the Marvellous History of General John Augustus Sutter*, has been translated into many languages, and provided the basis for the movie *Sutter's Gold*; its screenplay was worked on by William Faulkner. The adjective "marvellous" cautions the reader to regard what is presented as a work dealing with legend, not dry facts and scholarship. Sutter is the first in a line of outsized men with an overabundance of energy, intelligence, ambition and pride. Cendrars concisely sketches Sutter's escape from Europe, his prosperity in California, and the sudden downfall of his empire due to "the simple blow of a pickaxe." Built on agriculture, textiles and trade, and assisted by the use of slaves, Sutter's industrious fiefdom, and the man himself, are unprepared for what the discovery of gold on his land brings with it. A chapter located at almost the halfway mark expresses the rupture of an almost Edenic life (save for the slaves and the aboriginal peoples) with economy, and is worth reprinting in total:

> Reverie. Calm. Repose.
> It is Peace.
> No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No: it is GOLD!
> It is gold.
> The gold rush.
> The world is infected with gold fever.
> The great gold rush of 1848, 1849, 1850 and 1851. It will last for fifteen years.
> SAN FRANCISCO!

That “no” moves the reader from contradiction to realization, from grim acceptance to panic and fear. This parable of greed charts the decline in Sutter’s mental health and fortune, the death of family members, and his years in Washington spent labouring for financial recompense. Stylistically, in *Gold* sparse sentences carry much weight, while repetition, along with historical facts and occasional longer descriptions, subtly merge reportage and fictional narrative. Panoramic set-pieces of travellers heading west into dangerous lands or Sutter’s voyages across the Pacific showcase Cendrars’s experience in the cinema. This novel is a bridge between the compressed lines of poetry he fashioned in the early 1920s and the more expansive novels to come.

After dealing with terrorism and a regicide in *Moravagine*, Cendrars created an ostensibly benevolent figure, a rich man with grand ideas. *Dan Yack* breaks into two parts and is told in the third person. Heartbroken by Hedwiga’s decision to marry another man despite possibly carrying his child, Dan Yack invites three artists to join him, at his expense, on a year-long retreat from civilization. The sculptor Ivan Sabakov, the musician André Lamont and the poet Arkadie Goischman board the Green Star, one of Dan Yack’s vessels. A globe is suspended, with each artist allowed one shot to decide where the four men (and Dan Yack’s dog, Bari) will reside. Lamont deliberately severs the string attached to the globe; it crashes to the floor, rendering Antarctica their destination. It is March 1905. A shelter is set up, provisions are stored away, and the vessel departs. “Naturally, things did not run smoothly,” begins one section laconically, and the colony soon self-destructs. When the Green Star returns a year later, the second part begins. Dan Yack plunges into his family’s business, whaling, and over several years expands its market through modernization of the fleet and the invention of new products. At Community City, in Port Deception, he “wanted to found a kind of universal happiness...” Though successful in business, Dan Yack has never recovered from the loss of Hedwiga; his torment is intensified when he falls in love with an unattainable woman he meets towards the end of the novel. He suffers from a suicidal impulse which is barely restrained by an unconscious determination to act, to resist stasis. The whirl of events, and the twists and turns of Dan Yack’s mind, are reflected in the hectic, fragmented utterances found throughout the novel. Here, the technique of short sentences, familiar from *Gold*, is adjusted to contain a lyricism that seeks to capture natural beauty and events; yet Cendrars also shows that impressions come too quickly for words to convey the experience:

> An iceberg turns upside-down and disintegrates. In its fall, it brings down rags of tattered mist.
> A dome of blue sky, then a luminous rift that descends right down to the level of the seething water.
> A ray of sunlight is sprinkled over the mountains of floating ice, which break up and distil its light.
> Everywhere, dazzling light. The rainbow is knotted into a whirlwind of sapphires, emeralds, rubies; it is a constantly shaken kaleidoscope, changing, splintering, reflecting and refracting...
> The mist is viscous.
> The sea breaks up.
> It is choppy.
> Everything is rocking.

Confessions of Dan Yack is the first-person account of Dan Yack's life in a châlet above the village of Chamonix. There he mourns the death of Mireille, a young woman he loved. From January to September 1925 he records his memories into a dictaphone, narrating what life was like on Port Deception before and after the Germans took control, describing his service in the war, and how he met Mireille. Reading aloud from her notebooks, Dan Yack says: "I should have bought this machine for her. She could have spoken into it. And today I should be listening to her voice..." Though the narrative shifts from the source of his grief to apparently unrelated incidents—the war, opinions about New Zealand, a search for gold in the mountains around him—each story reveals a different aspect of this formerly powerful man. In an act of petty cruelty meant to correct an injustice or imbalance, he plots to kill two eagles whose nest is near the châlet. Since he and Mireille cannot live together (in the same way he could not live with Hedwiga and their son) the eagles have no right to live as a pair either.

Eventually Dan Yack moves on to the next phase of his life, but he is no longer as decisive. The novel's pace is slow, its tone is mournful, at times grim, and the depiction of a man who is unable to stop death or loss from visiting him connects this work, in a natural and thematically faithful way, with the last pages of *Dan Yack*.

Short quotations don't adequately convey the momentum of Cendrars's prose, whether in the cascade of a set of short sentences or in the piling up of clauses in one-sentence paragraphs that span pages. Nor can a review do justice to his intricate plots, the exuberant imagination, the delight in language, the intelligence and the geniality of the work, and its varieties of humour. Peter Owen deserves credit for reissuing these novels and *To the End of the World* (there are tentative plans for *The Astonished Man* to appear this spring). There will be those who find Cendrars's style too rich, but there will be others who will be carried away by his adventures, verve and audaciousness.