

# From Prose to the Poem of Paris, or Cendrars's Tour

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# From Prose to the Poem of Paris or Cendrars' *Tour*

Mary Ann Caws

## 1. Reading of the "Tour"

Les fenêtres de ma poésie sont  
grand'ouvertes sur les boulevards.

The windows of my poetry are wide open  
on the boulevards (74)<sup>1</sup>

In their spirit, the titles of Cendrars' collections of poetry entitled "Du monde entier" (1912-24) and "Au coeur du monde" (1924-29), stretching from "the whole world" to the "heart of the world," would seem to indicate a progression from wide and exterior toward narrow and interior. Both in those brightly colored windows of Cendrars' and Apollinaire's "cubist" poetry from which a simultaneous vision is to be grasped, and in the postcards from the Americas with their everything-available-in-one-instant feeling, this momentary vision seems to set the largest of possible frames for the scene. And if occasionally the reader senses the narrator's outward discouragement with an outward landscape, such as these lines from "Ma danse":

Je suis un monsieur qui en des express fabuleux  
traverse les toujours mêmes Europes et regarde  
découragé par la portière (82)

(I am a gentleman who in fabulous express trains  
crosses Europes always the same and looks  
discouraged through the door)

it seems to lead to the opposite sense, an open statement of optimistic reaction where the interior man converges with his exterior possibilities of vision: "Moi qui suis ébloui" ("I who am dazzled") (96).

Now, these two examples of tentative readings, or *passages*, themselves use a highly controversial line of transition: they consider all the poetry—for

the needs of both the poetic present and the lyric project—as one poem, like Robert Desnos’ insistence that all his creations, like those of any poet, are but fragments of one unconscious poem, of which diverse parts are seen to surface in the conscious mind. The cardinal rule of such a reading (which one might consider profitable or useless, depending on the results) is a chronological one, and its stylistic mark is the stress by repetition of certain passages, images, and expressions, these recurrences studding the text. The repetitive statements and recyclings serve in the effort to see a wide scope of elements, then narrowing, as if one were to train oneself to perceive an exterior spectacle and then an inner one. The image of the wheel is related in its turn to the tower, although by the addition of a negative marker: “tour/*tourne*,” so that a series of poems related to the double image is generated, in a facility which we might find somewhat offputting. The following extract is taken from a poem called, very precisely, “Tour,” and based largely on the shift of the above expressions one into the other, by a three-stage process:

Tout/tu/tout/tour.

Phonetically, the turning is cyclical, but at the same time semantically progressive, since the Tour with a capital T, for a specific Tower, becomes a tour of another sort—even a world tour—added on to the first, gathered within it for a double turning:

O Tour Eiffel!  
 ...  
 O Tour Eiffel!  
 ...  
 tu es tout  
 Tour  
 ...  
 Sujet de mon poème  
 Tour  
 Tour du monde  
 Tour en mouvement (71)

(Oh Eiffel Tower!  
 ...  
 Oh Eiffel Tower!  
 ...  
 you are everything  
 Tower  
 ...  
 Subject of my poem  
 Tower  
 World tour  
 Moving tower)

The conclusion of “Ma danse,” again titled by a turning, is a similar spinning motion, “Je tout-tourne,” possibly arrived at by phonetic extension with a subsequent elision of the “tu”:

je/(tu)/tout/tourne.

In any case, the “je” and the final “ne” or negative marker on the “tourne” might seem to cancel one another out, the spinning retrospectively denying the subject (“je” = “ne”), or at least subordinating it to inclusion in the all (“tout”) or the turn or the tower (“tour”):

$$\text{Je tout-tourne} = \frac{\text{tout}}{\text{je}} - \frac{\text{tour}}{\text{je}}$$

Now the spokes of the wheel may first be looked at as immobile objects; we remember Reverdy’s description of the cubist poem as static. (The description converges with Marcel Duchamp’s own description of the “Nude descending a staircase” as a static portrayal of motion.)<sup>2</sup> The wheel is finally supposed to turn, as the analysis of the repetition of parts or of stressed partiality should eventually lead to aesthetic entirety, the individual spokes disappearing in the revolution of the *tour*.

## 2. A Moving Train

Yet the poem of the train to be considered, that is, the epic of the Transsibérien Express, or the modestly entitled “Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France” turns faster and faster in its reading, yet slows for moments of melancholy pause or visionary halt, for the reader as for the poet. The poem takes us along one track, but at several differing rhythms, forcing us to examine, in passing, the relation of reader to a text of motion, inseparable in this case from sentiment, or emotion; then Apollinaire’s warning to himself or perhaps also to us goes along those lines:

Crains qu’un jour un train ne t’émeuve plus

(Fear that some day a train will no longer move you)

The line is *moving* precisely because of its implications about the relation of emotion to motion.

In our tracking here, occasional reverse turns will be visible, as on that clock Cendrars and Apollinaire both mention, whose hands turn backward, in the Jewish quarter of Prague<sup>3</sup>—the image haunts this poem also. Here the train moves at a changing pace, clacking along, only to slow at certain way-stations and speed past others, stretching and retracting like an accor-

dion. The poem itself is initially situated in solitude and in the past, located by a standard narrative description: “En ce temps-là j’étais en mon adolescence / J’avais à peine seize ans” (“At that time I was in my adolescence / I was barely sixteen”) (27). It ends in the future and still in solitude: “Puis je rentrerai seul” (“Then I shall go home alone”) (45), as the final evocation stretches, in one line, from the unique convergence of tower and turning to the revolving wheel. The poem is set up in a binary rhythm, easily perceptible in a first glance at the most noticeable stress points, such as the alternation between *être* and *savoir*, being and knowing, or then between the alternative conceptions of poetry, the timid or the restrained and the extreme:

Et j’étais déjà si mauvais poète  
Que je ne savais pas aller jusqu’au bout. (27)

(And I was already such a bad poet  
That I didn’t know how to go on to the end.)

Pourtant, j’étais fort mauvais poète.  
Je ne savais pas aller jusqu’au bout. (28)

(However I was quite a bad poet.  
I didn’t know how to go on to the end.)

And then, the alternation is compressed into a single line, containing both the will and the ability, the *vouloir* and *pouvoir*, the *moi* and the *je*, the nowhere and the everywhere: “Moi, le mauvais poète qui ne voulais aller nulle part, je pouvais aller partout” (“I, the bad poet who wanted to go nowhere, I could go everywhere”) (29). In much the same sort of binary structuring, the poem alternates between melancholy and triumph, pity and exultation, fatigue and exhilaration at the passing spectacle, both sides of which eventually converge in the all-inclusive double yet simple image of traveling youngster and sensitive poet. Here, as elsewhere, we notice the stammering characteristic of the sad and nostalgic moments: “Et pourtant, et pourtant / J’étais triste comme un enfant” (“And still, and still / I was as sad as a child”) (31). This acknowledgment, precisely in the form of a child’s song, prepares the lament of the variegated life, thrown over the traveler like a multicolored shawl, pieced together in madness and to the ceaseless sound of a traveling vehicle with its frenzied wheels in the furrows of the sky, elevated exactly by its mad motion.

Frequently, the cry for pity is raised for all travelers of all texts and not just for the everlastingly un-understanding companion whose plaintive tones repeatedly ask a question touching in its absurdity and by its recurrence: “Blaise, dis, sommes-nous bien loin de Montmartre?” (“Say, Blaise, are we very far from Montmartre?”). Of course we know that Blaise is, at least in

part, asking the question of himself; of course we are already persuaded of the eternal loneliness of each real voyage and the distance at which it places us from ourselves and from our own narration, even that of the voyage itself, as we are filled with our ironic pity for our own pity: “J’ai pitié j’ai pitié viens vers moi je vais te conter une histoire / . . . je vais te conter une histoire . . . / Oh viens! viens!” (“I’m sorry sorry come here I’ll tell you a story / . . . I’m going to tell you a story . . . / Oh come! come!”) (38-39). Scanned by a series of sympathetic repetitions, the poem continues to its own end, appropriating formally also the image of the turning mind, of the revolving wheel:

Le train avance et le soleil retarde  
 . . . . .  
 Le train tonne sur les plaques tournantes  
 Le train roule (39)

(The train moves on and the sun holds back  
 . . . . .  
 The train thunders across the turntables  
 The train rolls on)

But the binary rhythm is now stressed within the motion itself, as the world spins backward: “Et le monde . . . tourne éperdument à rebours” and then forward beyond the limit of its tracks, amid a noise of storm and at whirlwind speed:

Effeuille la rose des vents  
 Voici que bruissent les orages déchaînés  
 Les trains roulent en tourbillon sur les réseaux enchevêtrés (40)

(Take the petals from the rose of the winds  
 Here the unchained storms are raging  
 The trains roll like a whirlwind across the tangled networks)

The spinning of the universe too is included in the lines of this poem and of the multiple tracks of poetry like a new geometry: ancient history and modern, shipwrecks and whirlwinds, lead to the overt recognition of individuality. There recurs the haunting refrain of the humble poet starting out, gradually reinforced by insertion in a litanic repetition where the intensity accumulates. The play of *être* against *savoir*, already familiar to the reader of Cendrars, is rendered more moving by the phonetic half echo: “Je suis encore . . . je ne sais pas . . . je ne sais pas . . .,” and the fear confessed now takes us to the interior or the heart of the voyage, of this passage we see at the poetic center of this “prose.” The repetition is given a particular stress by the apparently explanatory beginning:

Car je suis encore fort mauvais poète  
Car l'univers me déborde  
Car j'ai négligé de m'assurer contre les accidents de chemin de fer  
Car je ne sais pas aller jusqu'au bout  
Et j'ai peur.

J'ai peur  
Je ne sais pas aller jusqu'au bout (41)

(For I'm still a very bad poet  
For the universe is too much for me  
For I forgot to take out insurance for train wrecks  
For I don't know how to go on to the end  
And I'm afraid.

I'm afraid  
I don't know how to go on to the end.)

The quietly anguishing statement of fear and inability and ignorance haunts the text—"je ne peux pas / j'ai peur j'ai peur / Je ne sais pas"—playing against the rapidly shifting spectacle beyond the window and the screeching of the wheels, matched to an equally rapid shift of verb tenses. From the imperfect, to the present, to the compound past; from preterite to present to conditional perfect to present, and finally to future, the dislocated tenses correspond to the shifts and starts, the singular rhythms and discontinuities of this *vehicle* as well as this perception. The poet at last gives up to the "somersaults" of his memory, where the "leaps" remind us of Breton's convulsive beauty, figured by a train leaving and yet not leaving the Gare de Lyon.<sup>4</sup>

Then the train slows down so that the eternal liturgy of repetition, like so many hysterical sobs, may lead us directly to the almost frenetic statement of vision, whose "J'ai vu . . . J'ai vu" brings the voyage of a *Bateau ivre* back to the space of this other trip, vision back to vision:

J'ai vu  
J'ai vu  
Et mon oeil . . . court encore derrière ces trains  
. . . . .  
J'ai vu . . .

Et j'ai vu  
J'ai vu . . .  
. . . . .  
Je revois quand je veux . . . (42-43)

(I saw  
 I saw  
 And my eyes . . . are still running behind these trains  
 . . . . .  
 I saw  
  
 And I saw  
 I saw  
 . . . . .  
 I see again when I want to . . .)

The struggle against the present vision is visible: “J’aurais voulu dormir . . .” (“I should have liked to sleep . . .”), yet the perception is finally optimistic as concerns poetry. In the initial stretch, the images were presented in the diffuse perception often present in Apollinaire; for instance, in the Kremlin, where all the pigeons flew upward on the square: “Et mes mains s’envolaient aussi, avec des bruissements d’albatros” (“And my hands flew upward also, with albatross rustlings”) (28). Those pigeons were in context marked by the unhealthy sight of a wounded sun, quite as fiery as Apollinaire’s “cou coupé”<sup>5</sup> or his brazier for the birth and consummation of poetry: “Et le soleil était une mauvaise plaie / Qui s’ouvrait comme un brasier” (“And the sun was a festering wound / Opening like a brazier”).<sup>6</sup> But near the conclusion of our own *Prosa* of this poem, the recognition of things outside stretches past vision to include the other senses: “Je reconnais tous les pays les yeux fermés à leur odeur / Et je reconnais tous les trains au bruit qu’ils font” (“With my eyes closed I recognize all countries by their smell / And I recognize all trains by the noise they make”) (43). Then the climax of this unsurpassed text of a train creates the perfectly moving aesthetic of unification after division, a manifesto of triumph and of convulsive beauty whose parts are reassembled and circled by the poet’s voice, possessing, and yet endlessly possessed:

J’ai déchiffré tous les textes confus des roues et j’ai rassemblé  
 les éléments épars d’une violente beauté  
 que je possède  
 Et qui me force. (44)

(I deciphered all the confused texts of wheels and I reassembled  
 the scattered elements of a violent beauty  
 that I possess  
 And which forces me)

The traveler goes no further. This is the last station, says the poet, and the text of voyage ends with a celebration of just one city and its own poetically ardent passages: “O Paris / Grand foyer chaleureux avec les tisons

entrecroisés de tes rues . . .” (“Oh Paris / Great warm hearth with the mingled firebrands of your streets . . .”) (44). Here the vision spreads beyond, extending even to the realm of literature seen in its own colored covering or travel costume:

Et voici des affiches, du rouge du vert  
comme mon passé bref du jaune  
Jaune la fière couleur des romans de la France à l'étranger. (44)

(And here are posters, from red to green, multicolored  
like my brief yellow past  
Yellow the proud color of French novels abroad)

Its colors are now those of another poet's windows—Apollinaire's as colored by Delaunay—reflecting thus the paintings of another pen: “Du rouge au vert tout le jaune se meurt”<sup>77</sup> (“From the red to the green all the yellow dies”). The vision is forever central, and the perception forever that of a single place, all-inclusive like the heart for all departures as for all returns, textual travel at its brightest point: “O Paris / Gare centrale débarcadère des volontés carrefour des inquiétudes” (“Oh Paris / Central station landing-stage of wills crossroads of unease”) (44).

In conclusion, the poet's own anguished regret, stated haltingly, incompletely at first, and then necessarily heard, is perhaps our own, after all our reading, our departures and returns. Cendrars' stammering confession forms, paradoxically, the summit of his poem, like a positive strength whose application is left open, found within a partial refusal: “Je voudrais / Je voudrais n'avoir jamais fait mes voyages” (“I wish / I wish I'd never made my trips”) (45). For the intensity of this personal manifesto, moving in its situation like a negative desire tragically inscribed at the center of the action, does not cancel out the text of the train and its own *station*, but rather reinforces the triumph of personal vision over confusion, the reassembling of the whole being after dispersion. It takes its unequaled passion from its own consciousness of solitude, like that of a traveler, from the initial narration of “ce temps-là,” through one text and in one town with its repeated landmarks, until his return. That return is signaled and celebrated by the Tower's turning like the wheel about which the poem and the voyage circle—by way of an echo of Villon's own Paris landscape, racked by the instruments of punishment toward a conclusion unforgettably moving:

Je suis triste je suis triste  
. . . . .  
. . . je rentrerai seul

Paris

Ville de la Tour unique du grand Gibet et de la Roue.(45)

(I am sad I am sad

.....

... I shall return alone

Paris

City of the unique Tower of the great Gallows and of the Wheel.)

#### NOTES

1. Page references are to Blaise Cendrars, *Du monde entier* (Poésie/Gallimard, 1967).
2. Marcel Duchamp, *Marchand du Sel* (Le Terrain Vague, 1958), p. 110.
3. Cendrars in the "Prose du Transsibérien," Apollinaire in "Zone."
4. André Breton, *Nadja* (Livre de Poche, 1968), p. 186. The Lumière film on the Gare de Lyon has the train continually arriving in the station, so that the loop gives the same impression of convulsive beauty.
5. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," *Oeuvres poétiques* (Ed. Pléiade, 1965), p. 44.
6. Apollinaire, "Le Brasier," *Oeuvres poétiques* (Ed. Pléiade), pp. 108-09.
7. Apollinaire, "Les Fenêtres," *Oeuvres poétiques* (Ed. Pléiade 1965), p. 169.