**‘Ma belle machine à écrire’: Poet and Typewriter in the Work of Blaise Cendrars**

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In 1917, little more than a year after he returned from the French front to a Paris transformed by World War I, Blaise Cendrars (né Frédéric Sauser) composed a prose poem that encapsulates his ambivalent relationship with modern technology. ‘Profond aujourd’hui’ (‘Profound Today’), a sequence of images depicting the contemporary metropolis, juxtaposes the human, the animal, and the machine, eliding the boundaries between them. In this turbulent landscape, ‘locomotives rear and steamships whinny on the water. Never will a typewriter commit an etymological spelling error, but the man of intellect stammers, chews his words, and breaks his teeth on antique consonants’.1 This arresting opening, which treats the mechanized world as a menagerie of mystical beasts, both beautiful and destructive, establishes Cendrars’s fascination with technologies of writing and travel, an obsession that connects him with F.T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists of the period. Although Cendrars was not himself a Futurist, his work epitomizes what Marjorie Perloff calls ‘the Futurist Moment’, a period of creative rupture in which artists in all media sought to break with the past and forge new styles more appropriate to a contemporary society on the verge of technological and political upheaval.2 Cendrars’s choice of the railroad train, steamship, and typewriter as starting points in his appraisal of the period reflects the centrality of these three modern machines to his writing.

The train first appears in Cendrars’s work before the war in the long narrative poem La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jeanne de France, in which the speaker travels to and from France by the Transsiberian Express, and then in Le Panama ou Les Aventures de Mes Sept Oncles, a text that includes train route maps and an advertisement from the Denver, Colorado chamber of commerce. After the war, when Cendrars befriended Brazilian writer Oswaldo de Andrade, he forged a relationship with the South American avant-garde and traveled to Brazil by steamship several times, in the process composing a series of travel poems he would publish in 1923 as Feuilles de Route.3 These poems treat his experience both on shipboard and on land, illuminating not only the experience of travel in the 1920s, but the experience of a traveling writer, one beset with unfinished projects and the sense that, as he writes, ‘I don’t have a minute to lose’.4 In these poems, the typewriter alluded to in ‘Profond aujourd’hui’ not only makes an appearance; it plays a key role in several poems about the act of writing. In the poem ‘Bagage’, Cendrars lists the belongings he has taken with him for the trip to South America, including: the manuscripts of the novels Moravagine and Le Plan de l’Aiguille, which he claims he must finish before they dock; a large dictionary; ‘Ma Remington portable dernier modèle’ (p. 316); and several kilos of blank paper, perhaps to feed into that ‘latest model Remington’. Although his admiration for the device, which he refers to in several poems as ‘ma belle machine à écrire’, or ‘my beautiful typewriter’, is evident throughout the Feuilles, by 1951 Cendrars would deny having been influenced by the ‘machine’ at all. Questioned by an interviewer about the impact of material comforts like the telephone, television, radio, and typewriter on his work, Cendrars replies, ‘Tout ça, c’est rigolo! Ce sont “les petits accessoires de la vie moderne”. Mais on peut fort bien s’en passer’.5 His claim that he could easily do without these ‘little accessories of modern life’ may reflect the extent to which the typewriter’s novelty had worn off by that period, a decade in which the device had become ubiquitous. Perhaps at a time when Cendrars was no longer writing poetry, but working on novels and journalism, he wanted to distance himself from his earlier engagement with the machine that was once so central to his poetics.

While much has been written on Cendrars’s relationship with trains and travel,6 little has been said regarding the role of the typewriter in his work, in part because the Feuilles de Route, as Monique Chefdor has noted, are written ‘in a style that defies all critical commentary by its utter candor and simplicity …a travel diary’.7 She reads the poems as reveling in the subjective sensual experience of the journey, ‘in contrast with the harrowing plunge into the divided consciousness of the age which [Cendrars] was dramatizing at the time in his major prose works’.8 Although these poems are indeed written with the clarity of a ‘travel diary’, Cendrars’s foregrounding of the typewriter and the act of writing within them provides more than simply a record of his daily activities. By encoding the act of transcription into the poems themselves, Cendrars makes these works about the act of writing and the materiality of the page. Teasing out the relationship between typewriter and poet reveals a poetics as complex and ‘divided’ as it initially seems clear.

The typewriter would have served a highly practical purpose for Cendrars after the war in which he lost his right arm to combat. Though he learned to write with his left hand shortly after the amputation, as Jay Bochner notes, his penmanship is so visibly different one can easily date his post-war writing by it. In an unaddressed and unsent letter written during his recovery, Cendrars jests, ‘J’ai le bras droit amputé. Cela me rajeunit jusqu’au barbouillage’,9 mocking the way his amputation has ‘rejuvenated him as far as scribbling’, an image that suggests both a reduction of his writing ability and a renewed love (re-juvenation – a return to juvenility, to childhood) of messiness. With his reduced dexterity, the typewriter would have provided Cendrars a means of writing swiftly and clearly, enabling him to use both his able hand and his hook at the keyboard.10 Additionally, the typewriter occasions rapidity because of the keys’ simultaneous inscription of entire letters as opposed to the several strokes required to make each character when writing longhand. Cendrars’s claim in ‘Lettre’, one of the early poems in Feuilles de Route, ‘Ma Remington est belle pourtant / Je l’aime beaucoup et travaille bien / Mon écriture est nette et claire’ (p. 307); ‘But my Remington is beautiful / I really love it and the work goes well / My writing is sharp and clear’ (p. 143), foregrounds the utility of the machine in terms of visual clarity. Cendrars’s ‘barbouillage’ gives way to neat and natty text.

Early typewriters were in fact developed to assist the disabled, with prototypes of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century often manufactured and marketed explicitly to the blind or deaf.11 These early models were clumsy and slow, and it was not until Christopher Latham Sholes sold his patent for a writing machine modeled on the piano’s system of hammers to E. Remington and Sons in 1873 that speed was finally achieved. The development of the typewriter was facilitated by the American Civil War, as the post-war slump left Remington with unused manufacturing capacity that could be turned toward the new machine. The linking and tripping mechanisms were an easy extension of arms manufacture and with this partnership, as Friedrich Kittler points out, ‘The typewriter became a discursive machine gun’.12 The interlinking of these technologies brings new meaning to Dadaist Richard Huelsenbech’s professed desire ‘to make literature with a gun in [his] pocket’. 13 The ‘belle machine à écrire’ enabled writers of the period ‘to make literature’ with guns on their desks.

While he evidently appreciated the clarity and speed of the machine, Cendrars may well have used the romantic epithet above as an allusion to the popular use of the term ‘typewriter’ to refer to both the machine and its female operator.14 The entry of women into the office setting as typists gave rise to much humour regarding dalliances between the boss and his secretary that drew on this multivalent word. In his history of the typewriter, Bruce Bliven cites an American cartoon in which two men in an office eye a Remington model 4, one of them offering, ‘What a pretty typewriter you have!’ and the other replying, ‘Pretty! She’s angelic. Why, man, when that girl taps off an ordinary letter on that dusty old machine, you’d think you were listening to a symphony from Beethoven’ (WWM p.73).15 Of course, Cendrars’s machine was indeed ‘belle’. As the first portable typewriter with a complete 4-tier keyboard, ‘the latest model’ portable Remington in 1924 accommodated all of the functionality of a full-sized typewriter in a sleek black three-inch-high frame that echoed the modern lines of the art deco age.16

The beauty and speed of Cendrars’s machine link it closely with the train he used in La Prose du Transsibérien as a model for the simultaneity of modern life, in which, as Perloff notes, ‘to be, figuratively speaking, in two places at once now became a possibility’.17 For Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, simultaneism was ‘the synthesis of what one remembers and of what one sees’,18 a temporal proximity of present and past. Cendrars incorporates simultaneity into the Prose, as Perloff has noted, through juxtaposition with the abstract, brightly-hued artwork of Sonia Delaunay, which was meant to be viewed concurrently with the text, but also through the ‘spatial and temporal distortions’ of present and past, Russia and Paris.19 In his desire to reflect the abrupt pace and fragmentation of modern experience, the typewriter seems to supplant the train in Cendrars’s world of metaphors, a shift that not only alters the subject matter, but also the style of his writing, which moves from the Whitmanesque long free-verse lines of the Prose to the brief, unpunctuated present tense observations of the Feuilles. Perhaps the change in Cendrars’s work is indicative of what he wanted to accomplish in his poetry – a type of simultaneous subjectivity the typewriter enabled rather than enforced. With the typewriter, the merger of memory and vision, thought and word occurs immediately on the page – it is implicit in the act of inscription itself. The poet is no longer a spectator buffeted through time and space by the technology of modernity, he controls it, able to put each thought to paper as it comes to him, rendering the experience of travel with unprecedented immediacy.

The poems of Feuilles de Route are mostly short descriptions of places and people, culled from Cendrars’s several journeys between South America and France. He described them as postcards he sent or intended to send to friends, though several exceed traditional postcard length. This lineage, whether real or imaginary, accounts for the starkness and intimacy of the poems, which are at the same time distant and personal, like postcards, written often as a formality more to inform our loved ones that we are thinking of them than to really reveal something of what we have seen. The Feuilles rely on a present-tense narration of travel, their speaker delivering a commentary, moment-by-moment, on shipboard life. Thus, the longer poem ‘A Bord du Formose’ begins:

Le ciel est noir strié de bandes lépreuses

L’eau est noire

Les étoiles grandissent encore et fondent comme des cierges larmoyants

Voici ce qui se passe à bord

(p. 310)

[The sky is dark streaked with leprous bands

The water is dark

The stars grow even larger and melt like weeping tapers

Here’s what’s happening on board]

(p. 148)

Cendrars goes on to describe the different activities of the various ethnic groups on the ship, who have each claimed a different portion of the vessel: the Jews on the deck ‘are huddled together’, the Portuguese dance in the deckhouse, and ‘very clean and carefully combed German emigrants sing severe hymns and sentimental songs’ on the sterncastle (p. 149). In describing these groups by ethnicity, the speaker takes his place as an observer and outsider. His brief descriptions become a kind of inside joke with the letter’s recipient, a bit of long-distance gossip about the other passengers. He catalogues their movements with a lighthearted reverence, and the juxtaposition of all of these activities creates an unnatural simultaneity in which the author seems to be everywhere at once—on the open deck, in the deckhouse, in the salon, the smoking lounge, and even the pantry. Most perplexing of all, he is also seated before his page, composing the letter that contains these descriptions. While one might explain away the paradox as a fiction, or perhaps as the recollection of the writer having wandered around the ship before retiring to his quarters to compose, Cendrars himself offers a justification in the subsequent poem of the collection, ‘Lettre-Océan’ (‘Ocean Letter’). In this brief musing on the nature of shipboard missives, Cendrars asserts, ‘La lettre-océan n’a pas été inventée pour faire de la poésie / Mais quand on voyage quand on commerce quand on est à bord quand on envoie des lettres-océan / On fait de la poésie’ (p. 311).20 While ocean letters may not have been ‘invented for poetry’, he claims, the atmosphere surrounding them is one of poetry. Because they are written as part of the larger experience of travel (as expressed by the compression of activities on Cendrars’s list, which bleed one into the next without punctuation), simultaneity itself makes them poetic. The ocean-letter’s ability to encode the speed of both travel and thought enables the disembodied reportage that characterizes the Feuilles de Route. In order to keep pace with Cendrars’ peripatetic poetic transmission, the typewritten poem must change the look of his verse.

The typewriter that appears in these poems seems to be empowered in ways the poet himself is not. In ‘The Prose of the Transsiberian’, Cendrars laments his inability to fully express his emotional and poetic insight, as he reminisces, ‘j’étais déjà si mauvais poète / Que je ne savais pas aller jusqu’au bout’ (p. 236), or ‘I was already such a bad poet / That I didn’t know how to take it all the way’ (p. 15). In ‘Moonlight’, the fifth poem of Feuilles de Route, however, the poet is finally able to take it ‘all the way’:

On tangue on tangue sur le bateau

La lune la lune fait des cercles dans l’eau

Dans le ciel c’est le mât qui fait des cercles

Et désigne toutes les étoiles du doigt

Une jeune Argentine accoudée au bastingage

Rêve à Paris en contemplant les phares qui dessinent la côte de France

Rêve à Paris qu’elle ne connaît qu’à peine et qu’elle regrette déjà

Ces feux tournants fixes doubles colorés à éclipses lui rappellent ceux qu’elle voyait

 de sa fenêtre d’hôtel sur les Boulevards et lui promettent un prompt retour

Elle rêve de revenir bientôt en France et d’habiter Paris

Le bruit de ma machine à écrire l’empêche de mener ce rêve jusqu’au bout

Ma belle machine à écrire qui sonne au bout de chaque ligne et qui est aussi rapide

 qu’un jazz

Ma belle machine à écrire qui m’empêche de rêver à babord comme à tribord

Et qui me fait suivre jusqu’au bout une idée

Mon idée

(p. 307)

[The ship tangos from side to side

The moon the moon makes circles in the water

As the mast makes circles in the sky

Pointing its finger at the stars

A young girl from Argentina leaning over the rail

Dreams of Paris while gazing on the lighthouses that outline the coast of France

Dreams of Paris which she’s hardly seen and misses already

These turning fixed double colored intermittent lights remind her of the ones she saw

 from her window over the Boulevards and which promised her she’d come

 back soon

She dreams of going back to France soon and living in Paris

The sound of my typewriter keeps her from going all the way with her dream

My beautiful typewriter that rings at the end of each line and is as fast as jazz

My beautiful typewriter that keeps me from dreaming portside or starboard

And makes me go all the way with an idea

My idea]

The music of Cendrars’s ‘machine’, whose speed and cadence he likens to that of ‘jazz’, breaks up dreams and keeps its listeners present. It helps the poet to focus his energies, ‘keeps [him] from dreaming portside or starboard / and makes [him] go all the way with an idea’. Even the Argentine girl on deck feels the typewriter’s effect, ‘the sound […] keeps her from going all the way’ with her fantasy of Paris life, its noise at once distracting and riveting, disruptive and productive. Cendrars revels in the typewriter’s jazz-like speed, which enables the poet’s hands to keep pace with his thoughts,21 allowing him to stay in the present transcribing experience in detail: from the sensation of pitching back and forth on the ship’s deck to the sound of his fingers at the keys. With its controlled bruit, the typewriter becomes an instrument the poet plays, one that both stimulates and records his thoughts.22

The jazzy circularity of Cendrars’s language emphasizes the musical qualities of the typewriter, both in the ‘circle’ images of the moon on the water and the mast in the sky and in the recurring words and sounds of the first stanza. The repetition of ‘tangue’, ‘lune’, and ‘cercles’, and the end-rhymes between ‘bateau’ and ‘eau’, ‘mât’ and ‘doigt’ lend those first few lines a rocking quality, their tetrapodic meter reminiscent of a lulling nursery rhyme. The music of the second stanza, however, is more open; the long lines sped forward by internal rhyme. In particular, Cendrars’s description of the lights of France, an accumulation of adjectives describing their twinkling, moves through sonic and visual juxtaposition. One’s ear and eye are drawn from the long vowels and velar consonants of ‘fixes…éclipses’ to the succession of labial rhymes ‘rappellent … elle … hôtel’, which are in turn connected by the short ‘e’ to ‘promettent’, a word that sets off a series of plosive articulations in ‘promettent un prompt retour’. The sounds, like the ship, reel and pitch, propelling language just as the typewriter does. Padgett’s translation of ‘tangos’ for ‘tangue’ highlights this back-and-forth motion and suggests the physical exchange between passenger and ship, writer and machine.

In this poem and in ‘Écrire’, a poem that appears later in the collection during the return trip from South America, Cendrars emphasizes the typewriter’s ringing ‘at the end of’ (p. 186), or ‘au bout de’ (p. 307,p. 334) each line, once again drawing our attention to the machine’s ability to ‘take it all the way’, ‘aller jusqu’au bout’ (p. 236) as he himself could not in the ‘Prose of the Transsiberian’. The typewriter’s ring in turn draws attention to the ends of Cendrars’s own lines, which, though not literally punctuated, are often accented with sound. End-rhyme, buried rhyme, off-rhyme and assonance all assert the line as a carefully selected unit, regardless of the temptation to read through the enjambment and into the next phrase. Thus Cendrars heightens the sense that even as he foregrounds the typewriter, he also encodes his own artistic intent. We find ‘au bout’ a tension between the voice of the poet and the typewriter’s belle bell.

Cendrars’s distinction between ‘dream’ and ‘idea’ seems equally important to understanding the typewriter’s role in his poetics. The young woman cannot pursue her ‘dream’ of returning to Paris, a presumption based on her romantic notions of a place he asserts she barely knows. The typewriter keeps both woman and poet from dreaming, forcing the poet to focus on ‘mon idée’, ‘my idea’. This brief line that closes the poem foregrounds the way the typewriter pulls the speaker out of the stranger’s consciousness, which he has presumed to read or to ‘dream’ of. He speaks through the Argentinean girl, entering her mind through free indirect discourse to assert, ‘These turning fixed double colored intermittent lights remind her of the ones she saw from her window over the Boulevards and which promised her she’d come back soon’ (p. 144). This dream is both her own and Cendrars’s projection, a projection cut short, he says, by ‘the sound of my typewriter’. Cendrars speaks both from within and without (literally as well as figuratively—he is both in his cabin where he can type and outside, where he can gaze up at the mast and stars), achieving the goal he sets forth in ‘En Route to Dakar’, in which he bids adieu to Europe, asserting, ‘I want to forget everything no longer speak your languages […] to segment my own self / And become hard as a rock / Drop straight down / Sink to the bottom ‘ (p. 147). Perhaps the typewriter allows for this segmented self, its noise affecting both Cendrars and the woman by keeping them grounded in the present, as ‘hard’ and heavy as rocks – she unable to ‘go all the way with her dream’, and he forced to ‘go all the way with an idea’ (p. 144). The poem reveals a struggle between the poet’s desire to resist the lyric impulse that would reinscribe a unified subject and his awareness that he cannot enter into the consciousness of other people.23 In order to ‘segment’ himself, he moves between concrete description of the material world (the ‘on tangue on tangue’ that sonically mimics the pitching of the boat), his perceptions of the other passengers, and his sense of his own writerly isolation from them, the staccato keystrokes a reminder of his body’s location within this network of possibilities.

The typewriter, then, triangulates the poet’s experience – intervening both between him and others, and between him and the page. The result is a fragmented present of simultaneous, unpunctuated experience. The typewriter enables the poet’s hands to keep pace with his mind so that he may write, as he claims in ‘Cabin No. 6’, ‘everything that goes through my head’ (p. 157), or ‘tout ce qui me passe par la tête’ (p. 316). However, it also prevents him from becoming lost in the flow of reverie, such that he quickly revises, ‘Well not really everything / Because tons of things go through my head but don’t get out into the cabin’ (p. 157). The suggestion that writing or transcription takes ideas from the poet’s ‘head’ and makes them materially present ‘[in] the cabin’ suggests a censorial sensory relationship with his belle machine. One wonders to what extent the poet’s selection of ideas is his own, influenced as it is by the materiality of the type-written page.

Cendrars confronts the paradox of authorial agency in the poem ‘Lettre,’ which appears early in the collection. Addressing an unknown person (likely his lover, the actress Raymone Duchâteau, who appears in other Feuilles), who has requested he write to her on his voyage, he mocks gently:

Tu m’as dit si tu m’écris

Ne tape pas tout à la machine

Ajoute une ligne de ta main

Un mot un rien oh pas grand’chose

Oui oui oui oui oui oui oui oui

Ma Remington est belle pourtant

Je l’aime beaucoup et travaille bien

Mon écriture est nette et claire

On voit très bien que c’est moi qui l’ai tapée

Il y a des blancs que je suis seul à savoir faire

Vois donc l’œil qu’a ma page

Pourtant pour te faire plaisir j’ajoute à l’encre

Deux trois mots

Et une grosse tache d’encre

Pour que tu ne puisses pas les lire

(p. 307)

[You said to me if you write me

Don’t just use the typewriter

Add a line in your own hand

A word a nothing oh a little something

Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes

But my Remington is beautiful

I really love it and the work goes well

My writing is sharp and clear

It’s very easy to see that I did the typing

There are white spaces only I know how to make

See how my page looks

Still to please you I add in ink

Two three words

And a big blot of ink

So you can’t read them]

(p. 143)

The reference to Cendrars’s beautiful Remington here seems calculated to excite jealousy in his addressee, whom he patronizes slightly with the lilting ‘[o]ui oui oui oui oui oui oui oui’, as if to quiet the petulant child who begs for ‘un mot un rien oh pas grand’chose’. The teasing tone and the addressee’s request make the poem a comical love letter, depicting a love triangle between Raymone, Cendrars, and the typewriter.24 She ostensibly believes the typewriter depersonalizes Cendrars’s letters, asking for a handwritten line, ‘une ligne de ta main’ (p. 306), to supplement the typed text. Not only does this complaint reflect the extent to which typewriters were considered tools of business at the time, it reveals a lyric privileging of the authorial hand as a synecdochic extension of the psyche. She wants to see his handwriting to know he has touched the page. One wonders what such devotion to the ‘hand’ might mean to an author who has lost his own in the service of his adopted country. The notion of the hand as a mechanism for direct transcription becomes problematic when the hand is replaced with a hook, itself a metallic, slightly mechanical object. As Martin Heidegger would note in 1942:

Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this ‘advantage’, that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same.25

That Cendrars would embrace the typewriter as a means of transcription should come as no surprise then, in that it not only enables him to write more easily by reducing the burden to his left hand, but also undoes the lyric hierarchy that places the poet above all others, enabling him or her to speak (and write) from a unified perspective. It effects, as Friedrich Kittler has pointed out, Mallarmé’s ‘disparition élocutoire du poète’,26 a disappearance or withdrawal of the poetic voice akin to his wished-for ‘segmentation’.27 Rather than driving him to an anti-technological perspective like Heidegger’s this instability frees Cendrars, allowing him to float freely throughout the ship, unfettering him from the constraints of space and the body.

However, even in the face of this mechanization that ‘makes everyone look the same’, depersonalizing the written word, Cendrars asserts that the typewriter can and does inscribe some element of himself. On his page, ‘It’s very easy to see that I did the typing’, ‘On voit très bien que c’est moi qui l’ai tapée’, not because of the letters themselves, but because of the ‘white spaces’ or ‘blancs’ only he knows how to leave. Interestingly, Cendrars’s poems do not contain lacunae as ‘des blancs’ implies or as translator Ron Padgett inserts into ‘You Are More Beautiful Than the Sky and the Sea’, in which, describing his bath, the speaker claims, ‘I see the mouth I know / The hand the leg the the eye / I take a bath and I look’ (p. 142), the space perhaps implying that an inappropriate object of observation has been omitted. In the original French, however, the two ‘the[s]’ abut as ‘Le l’œil’, the capitalized ‘Le’ seeming to indicate some greater significance – perhaps his eye is ‘The’ eye, an all-encompassing truth like Wallace Stevens’ ‘The the’ in ‘The Man on the Dump’.28 Regardless of its deeper meaning, Padgett and Cendrars both invite readers to ‘look’ between the lines, to consider whether the aura of the poet can be present in the white spaces around words or in his line breaks, whether negative space can convey its own set of meanings in contradistinction to the text it surrounds.

Cendrars’s assertion anticipates the vogue for the typewritten word of the mid-twentieth century, precisely when he himself begins to disclaim the machine’s influence on his work. His sense that visual arrangement can encode something particular to the poet is echoed in Charles Olson’s idea of ‘projective verse’, the notion of ‘the typewriter as the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet’s work’,29 capable of inscribing his or her ‘breath’ onto the page through the visual arrangement of language. Olson argues, ‘For the first time, the poet has the stave and the bar a musician had […] he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his own work’.30 Olson’s choice of the homophone ‘rime’ indicates the extent to which he saw rhyme as a trapping of bygone poetic styles; rhyme for him is rimey, a rusty crust, perhaps on the hull of an old ship. That rime gives way to a more advanced, free-form musical composition with which the poet can record the meter of his or her own voice, a notion that encapsulates Cendrars’s sense of the typewriter’s ‘jazz’-like musical force.31

Although Cendrars shares Olson’s affinity for the speed and musicality of the machine, his poems are conflicted about the necessity of inscribing the poet himself on the page. To make his presence felt, it seems, the poet must merge with the machine. Cendrars explores this new ‘segmentation’ of self most clearly in the poem ‘Écrire’ (‘Writing’), in which the poet, holed up in his cabin on the return trip from South America, tries so hard to focus on his work that he must veil the mirror ‘pour ne pas me voir écrire’ (p. 334), so that he won’t have to see himself writing. The poet describes his writing method:

Ma machine bat en cadence

Elle sonne au bout de chaque ligne

Les engrenages grasseyent

De temps en temps je me renverse dans mon fauteuil de jonc et je lâche une grosse

 bouffée de fumée

(p. 334)

[My machine clacks in time

It rings at the end of each line

The gears roll their r’s

From time to time I lean back in my wicker chair and release a big fat puff of smoke]

(p. 186)

The experience of writing here is one in which the poet becomes more mechanical, puffing away like a smokestack on his cigarette, even as the machine itself becomes more human, its keys ‘bat[tent] en cadence’, beat (like a heart) in rhythm, and its gears ‘roll their r’s’ in the throaty and onomatopoeic ‘engrenages grasseyent’. Perhaps then the poet and typewriter are complementary voices, the machine preventing him from pursuing ethereal lines of thought and keeping him grounded in the reality of the twentieth century. This relationship is more collaborative than the one Olson describes. The projective verse poet manipulates the typewriter, which he sees as a tool, a means of visualizing the poet’s breath. Cendrars, on the other hand, lets his own breath be altered by the typewriter, lets the machine affect his lines, enabling him to take it ‘au bout’, to the end of the line where the carriage rings before returning. That repetition of ‘oui’ in the fifth line of ‘Lettre’ does not simply patronize the addressee, it also makes the line ending ‘ring’ or rhyme with the poem’s first line, recalling the typewriter’s presence. The consonance of dental and plosive sounds in ‘ne tape pas tout à la machine’ foregrounds the clicking of the keys even in this request for their absence, another slightly mocking gesture that forces the reader to associate the machine itself with the creation of the text. We are aware that even as he claims to add ‘à l’encre / Deux trois mots’, he is typing these words. The ink stain that blots out the handwritten text, undermining the supremacy of the pen, is nowhere to be found, itself replaced by type in the poem’s final jest. In part, the relationship between poet and typewriter feels collaborative because, like Cendrars, the page itself has an ‘eye’. In ‘Lettre’, he charges the poem’s recipient, ‘Vois donc l’œil qu’a ma page’, or ‘see the eye my page has’. Ron Padgett translates this line ‘see how my page looks’, a doubly-loaded phrase that both draws attention to the ‘look’ of the page with its typewritten lines and blank spaces and suggests that the page itself can look because ‘[ma page a] l’œil’, has an eye that is artistic, lively, present au bout every edge of the poem. The text takes on its original meaning, becoming ‘tissue’ or flesh, inscribing the poet’s absent hand back onto the page and in the process fulfilling the reader’s desire for ‘une ligne de ta main’.

While the Feuilles de Route do not explicitly incorporate visuality, Cendrars’s contemporaries experimented extensively with the page. From the Futurists’ typographical play and emphasis on the book as art form to Guillaume Apollinaire’s use of textual arrangement in his Calligrammes, often cited as precursors to mid-century ‘concrete poetry’, the avant-gardists of the early twentieth century evinced a strong interest in the semiotic impact of words’ style and layout.32 In his essay ‘L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes’, published the same year as Cendrars’s ‘Profond aujourd’hui’, Apollinaire (not only a fellow poet, but also a legionnaire, friend, and early influence) discusses the impact of the cinema, phonograph, and airplane on the arts, and calls for ‘typographical artifices worked out with great audacity’ in order to ‘mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized’. Although the Feuilles de Route eschew typographic play, Cendrars’s use of the typewriter does seem to be an attempt to find, as Apollinaire suggests, ‘a totally new lyricism for these new means of expression which are giving rise to art’.33 The self-segmentation and mechanization it allows reflect the fragmentation and velocity of modern life in a manner as subversive and conflicted as the surreal prose of ‘Profond aujourd’hui’ or kaleidoscopic lines of La Prose du Transsibérien, despite the plain-spoken style for which the Feuilles have been overlooked.

In his review of ‘Profond aujourd’hui’for Nord Sud, Pierre Reverdy praises Cendrars for reflecting the contemporary idiom in which ‘our brain is a dynamo fitted to a typewriter’ (qtd. BC 64).34 This merger of human and machine anticipates the collaborative impact of the typewriter on the Feuilles de Route and the image of the poet who writes ‘tout ce qui me passe par la tête’, but does not account for Cendrars’s evident discomfort at joining the chain of signifiers. Cendrars’s assertion in the piece, ‘[n]ever will a typewriter commit an etymological spelling error, but the man of intellect stammers, chews his words, and breaks his teeth on antique consonants’, implies that language itself is ‘antique’ in the modern mouth and that the typewriter obviates such linguistic mastication.35 While he praises the emerging technological world, he also expresses a sense of loss in joining it.36 In attempting to jettison the self, an act that is both ‘suicide’ and ‘regicide,’ the poet finds he is ‘impaled on my sensibility’, held back by an aesthetic sense that doesn’t fit the age. In order to move forward, he says, ‘I listen to the dying music of sentimentality that resonates in my helmet’, abandoning the romantic lyricism that propelled his early work.37

Perhaps the music of the typewriter’s ‘jazz’ subsumes that music of sentimentality, but as freeing as the typewriter is for him, it reveals that he is still impaled on ‘my’ (individual) sensibility. The pursuit of any idea is the pursuit of ‘mon idée’ (p.307, my emphasis), no matter whether the poet speaks as himself or another, and the typewriter still inscribes his presence, even as he strives for the poetic withdrawal of reportage. The clarity and simplicity of the Feuilles de Route reflect a poet torn between the impulse to do away with the self, to ‘become hard as a rock / Drop straight down / Sink to the bottom’ (p. 147), and to make ‘white spaces’ (p. 143) that reveal him even in his absence. Thus, as the book and voyage close, the poet writes his shortest poem. He can leave ‘des blancs’ that reveal as much about his concern over authorial identity as the Prose du Transsibérien’s repeated, self-mocking, ‘j’étais déjà si mauvais poète / Que je ne savais pas aller jusqu’au bout’ (p. 236)38 :

Pourquoi J’écris?

 Parce que…

 (CP 343)

[Why Do I Write?

 Because…]

 (CP 200)

Cendrars leaves the poem open through these ellipses, implying that he is simultaneously considering the question and typing his response. The text on the page is still alive, flexing itself for some coming thought, some idea that hasn’t yet made its way into the cabin. Because Cendrars refuses to go jusqu’au bout, casting off the bardic role that causes him such discomfort, it is up to the reader to fill in his blanks.

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**References**

1. Blaise Cendrars, Modernities and Other Writings, ed. Monique Chefdor, trans. Esther Allen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 3.
2. Marjorie Perloff, The Futurist Moment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. For more on the avant-guerre ‘romance of the machine’, see Perloff’s chapter, ‘The Great War and the European avant-garde’, in The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War, ed. Vincent Sherry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
3. Much has been written regarding Cendrars’s relationship with Brazilian writers. For the purposes of this paper, I bring them up only to establish the inspiration for the Feuilles de Route, which I believe merit closer study than they have received. A lineage might be traced, however from Cendrars through Oswaldo De Andrade to the Noigandres poets he inspired, progenitors of the ‘Concrete Poetry’ movement of the 1950s.
4. Blaise Cendrars, Complete Poems, trans. Ron Padgett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 184. All further quotations from Cendrars’s poetry are taken from this edition and appear in the text in parentheses. I rely on this edition for the French as well, which is copyright Éditions Denoël 1947. All translations are Padgett’s, unless otherwise indicated. When no page number is given, the translation is my own.
5. [‘All that, it’s funny! They are “the little accessories of modern life”. But one can very well do without them.’] Richard Hughes, ed., Dites-Nous Monsieur Blaise Cendrars … (Lausanne: Éditions Rencontre, 1969), p. 114.
6. See especially Kimberley Healey’s The Modernist Traveler: French Detours, 1900–1930 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), in which she discuses the impact of changed perceptions of time on Cendrars and Paul Morand, among others.
7. Monique Chefdor, Blaise Cendrars (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. 58.Jay Bochner analyzes the poems as ‘verbal photographs’, a term Cendrars himself used to describe them, in Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Re-creation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 131.
8. Monique Chefdor, introduction to Blaise Cendrars, Complete Postcards from the Americas: Poems of Road and Sea, by Blaise Cendrars (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 39.
9. [‘I have my right arm amputated. It has rejuvenated me as far as scribbling.’] Chefdor, Blaise Cendrars, p. 59
10. John Dos Passos describes Cendrars’s agility with his hook in The Best of Times. Discussing a visit to Monpazier in 1929, he notes, ‘It was hairraising to spin with him around the mountain roads. He steered with one hand and changed gears on his little French car with his hook. [...] Cendrars took every curve on two wheels’ (quoted in Chefdor, Blaise Cendrars, p. 71).
11. For a history of the typewriter and its impact on gender relations, authorship, and referentiality see Friedrich Kittler’s Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). For a historical account that includes much information on the marketing, sale, and mechanics of typewriters, see Bruce Bliven, The Wonderful Writing Machine (New York: Random House, 1954). Darren Wershler-Henry incorporates this historical material into an analysis of the cultural mystification of the machine in The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
12. Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 191.
13. Quoted in Perloff, ‘Great War’, p. 143. For an analysis of the joint ascension of the typewriter and the gun in America, see Barry Sanders, ‘Bang the Keys Swiftly: Typewriters and their Discontents’, Cabinet Magazine 8 (2002), http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/8/keys.php [accessed 3 June 2008].
14. Of course, the French for typist is dactylo, not machine à écrire, but Cendrars certainly would have been aware that the position was most often filled by women, thus his ‘beautiful’ writing machine becomes a kind of muse or assistant figure without the intervention of the dactylo.
15. Bliven, Wonderful Writing Machine, p. 73.
16. Richard Milton, ‘Remington’, The Portable Typewriter Website.
17. Perloff, Futurist Moment, p. 14. Interestingly, an advertisement for the Olivetti typewriter printed in 1920 highlights the connection between the typewriter and the train. It features a dramatic race between the two modern marvels in which the typewriter glides along a track of its own beside the train, sparks flying from the rails on which it glides and sheets of white paper trailing from the carriage as the bright new machine outpaces its blurred and straining forbear. The image can be found in Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 197.
18. Umbro Apollonio, ed., Futurist Manifestos, trans. Robert Brain et al. (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), p. 47.
19. Perloff, Futurist Moment, p. 9.
20. ‘The ocean letter was not invented for writing poetry / But when you travel when you do business when you’re on board when you send ocean letters / It’s poetry’, p. 150.
21. The typewriter’s transcriptive rapidity gave rise to the speed typing craze of the turn of the century, a vogue for contests, often sponsored by the typewriter manufacturers, in which champions became minor celebrities and helped to promote the brand of their preferred machine. For a history of such contests, see Bliven, Wonderful Writing Machine, pp. 111–30.
22. One notes that La Prose du Transsibérian is “Dédiée aux musiciens” p. 236.
23. Marjorie Perloff suggests that the Prose du Transsibérien is ‘an elaborate montage of sensations, images, and narrative fragments by means of which the poet tries to keep his ego intact’ (Futurist Moment, p. 23). Jay Bochner sees the Feuilles themselves as segments that blend one into the next like ‘a verbal photographic album which, taken in its entirety, has great evocative power’ (Chefdor, Blaise Cendrars, p. 134). This series of glimpses into Cendrars’s experience reveal something of him as a writer without ever providing an all-encompassing view. Perhaps, then, the struggle between fragmentation and the ego continues in the Feuilles de Route, but the speaker has embraced his own dislocation.
24. Once again, one hears echoes of the ‘angelic’ typewriter / typist joke.
25. Martin Heidegger, Parmenides, quoted in Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 199.
26. Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 228. Stéphane Mallarmé called for ‘la disparition élocutoire du poëte, qui cède l’initiative aux mots,’ or ‘the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words’ in his 1886–1895 essay ‘Crisis in Poetry.’
27. While such an authorial withdrawal does depersonalize the typewritten letter, there is evidence for a surge in typewritten personal correspondence at the turn of the century and during the First World War. Kittler notes that in 1916, Kafka relied on typed postcards to communicate with Felice Bauer because they were ‘the fastest way of passing through the war censorship between Prague and Berlin, Austria and Prussia’ (Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 223). For a closer analysis of the impact of the typewriter on ‘desk couples’, see Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, pp. 214-31.
28. In the introduction to Blaise Cendrars, Complete Postcards, Chefdor translates this line, ‘The hand the leg the THE EYE’ (p. 123), lending emphasis through caps.
29. Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, Collected Prose., Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 246.
30. Olson, Collected Prose, p. 245.
31. Marjorie Perloff has noted resonances between the forward-thrusting montage of fragments in La Prose du Transsibérien and Olson’s directive in ‘Projective Verse’ that ‘ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION…get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed’ (Futurist Moment, p. 23).
32. On the Futurists, see Johanna Drucker, The Century of Artists’ Books (New York: Granary Books, 2004). See also Perloff, Futurist Moment, chapter 3, ‘Violence and Precision’. For comparisons of Apollinaire with ‘concrete poetry’, see Emmett Williams, An Anthology of Concrete Poetry (New York: Something Else Press, 1967) and Mary Ellen Solt, Concrete Poetry: A World View (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968). Also see Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, p. 229.
33. Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire, trans. Roger Shattock (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 227.
34. Quoted in Chefdor, Blaise Cendrars, p. 229.
35. Cendrars, Modernities and Other Writings, p. 3.
36. After all, as he claims in the poem ‘Misprints’ in Feuilles de Route, ‘Spelling errors and misprints make me happy / Some days I feel like making them on purpose / That’s cheating / I really love mispronunciations hesitations of the tongue and the accents of all local dialects’ (p. 190). Perhaps Cendrars loves these errors because they reveal their author as an individual.
37. Cendrars, Modernities and Other Writings, p. 6.
38. ‘I was already such a bad poet / That I didn’t know how to take it all the way’ (p. 15).