

from *THE FUTURIST MOMENT*

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IN THE AUTUMN OF 1913, *Les Hommes nouveaux*, a radical journal and small press founded by Blaise Cendrars and his friend Emile Szytta, published a remarkable verbal-visual text called *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*. It bore the subtitle: "poèmes, couleurs simultanées de tirage atteignant la hauteur de la Tour Eiffel: 150 exemplaires numérotés et signés" ("poems, simultaneous colors, in an edition attaining the height of the Eiffel Tower: 150 copies numbered and signed"). *Le Premier livre simultané*, as the work was also called, was made up of a single sheet of paper, divided down the center, which unfolded like an accordion, through twenty-two panels to a length of almost seven feet. The height of the Eiffel Tower was to be attained by lining up the 150 copies of the text vertically.

On the left, a panel containing the title page initiates the passage of the eye downward, through a sequence of visual semiabstract forms in bright primary colors, to a final panel that contains a child's image of the Eiffel Tower, a curiously innocent giant red phallus penetrating an orange Great Wheel with a green center. On the right, meanwhile, the text of the poem is prefaced by a Michelin railway map of the Trans-Siberian journey from Moscow to the Sea of Japan; underneath this map, a wide strip of green introduces the poem's title in big block letters as if the *pochoir* were a poster signboard. The text then follows, arranged in succeeding blocks made up of different typefaces and broken by large irregularly shaped planes of predominantly pastel color. The coda, "Paris / Ville de la Tour unique du grand Gibet et de la Roue" ("Paris / City of the incomparable Tower of the Rack and the Wheel"), corresponds to the visual image of tower and wheel on the bottom left.

*La Prose du Transsibérien* was the collaboration of the poet Blaise Cendrars and the painter Sonia Delaunay. The particular version of modernity found in this text makes it an especially fitting emblem of what I call the Futurist moment. Cendrars's is not, of course, strictly speaking a "Futurist" (e.g., Italian Futurist or Russian Futurist) poem, but, perhaps precisely for that reason, it furnishes us with a paradigm of Futurism in the larger sense, as the arena of agitation and projected revolution that characterizes the *avant guerre*. Certainly, *La Prose du Transsibérien* embodies Antonio Gramsci's understanding, voiced in *L'Ordine Nuovo* (the official organ of the newly formed Italian Communist party), that Futurism was the first movement to give artistic expression to the "intense and tumultuous life" of the newly industrialized urban landscape.

The very names Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay are emblematic of the anomalies that characterize the Futurist ethos. Mme Delaunay-Terk, as she is listed on the title page of the poem-painting, was born in the Ukraine to Jewish parents; as a small child she was adopted by her maternal uncle Henri Terk and grew up in Petersburg. In 1905 she went to Paris to study art; in 1909 she decided that the best way to assert her independence from her Russian relatives was to accept a marriage offer from a Parisian gallery owner, the German art collector William Uhde. A year later, the two were amicably divorced and Sonia Terk Uhde married her husband's painter friend Robert Delaunay.

Sonia Delaunay's place in the French avant-garde of the 1910s (it is usual to speak of the "orphism" or "simultaneism" of "the Delaunays" as if Sonia's work were no more than a footnote to Robert's) is thus complicated by her Russian origins and German Expressionist connections. Blaise Cendrars's self-characterization as the only poet in the Paris of 1913 who could seriously rival Apollinaire is even more ironic. Born in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, Cendrars was christened Frédéric Louis Sausser. As a young man he called himself Freddy Sausey, and then, by the late fall of 1911, when he was living in New York, he was using the signature Blaise Cendrart, a name that, at the time of his arrival in Paris a few months later, had become Blaise Cendrars. Blaise, as the poet later explained it to a friend, came from *braise* (ember, cinder) by means of the simple "confusion of R- and L-sounds"; as for Cendrars, from *cendres* (again cinders, though more in the sense of ashes), in his autobiographical fragment *Une Nuit dans la forêt*, the poet explains:

Well, one may adore fire, but not indefinitely respect the ashes; that's why I rake up my life and exercise my heart (and my mind and my balls) with the poker. The flame shoots forth.

The role-playing that transformed a Frédéric Sausser into Blaise Cendrars, a Sonia Terk into Madame Delaunay, points to the curious tension between nationalism and internationalism that is at the heart of *avant guerre* consciousness. Delaunay's abstractions have strong affinities to primitive Russian *lubki* (woodblocks) as well as to the collages of the Russian Cubo-Futurists who were her contemporaries; she also had contact with Wassily Kandinsky, then living in Munich. Yet although the Delaunays received artists and poets from all over Europe and the United States, she remained for the rest of her life ardently French, refusing, for example, so much as to visit America.

Again, the Switzerland of Cendrars's birth represented the confluence of German and Latin currents, specifically the Milan (Italian Futurist)-

Berlin (German Expressionist) axis. Freddy-Blaise was entirely bilingual (German-French); when he ran away from home at the age of seventeen and spent three years (1904-7) in St. Petersburg, he added Russian to his repertoire and then, in New York (1911-12), some English. Restlessly international by background and inclination, he had been in Paris a brief two years when the war broke out in August 1914. Nevertheless, despite his close ties with such German intellectuals and artists as Herwath Walden (the editor of *Der Sturm*) and Franz Marc, he could hardly wait to join the French Foreign Legion and to fight for what he, like his friend and fellow poet Apollinaire, who was also a foreigner with an adopted name, took to be the great cause. "This war," Cendrars wrote to a friend in September, on his way to the front, "is a painful delivery, needed to give birth to liberty. It fits me like a glove. Reaction or Revolution—man must become more human. I will return. There can be no doubt." And a little later, "The war has saved my life. This sounds like a paradox, but a hundred times I have told myself that if I had continued to live with those people [the bohemian radical artists of Montparnasse], I would have croaked." Within a year he had been wounded and lost his right arm: nevertheless on 2 November 1915 he wrote (painfully, with his left hand) to Apollinaire: "I had to have my arm amputated. I am as well as can be expected. My spirits are good."

Seventy years and two world wars later, it is almost impossible to understand this particular mixture of radicalism and patriotism, of a worldly, international outlook and a violently nationalist faith. Yet we find this paradox everywhere in the arts of the *avant guerre*. Before we dismiss as a contemptible proto-Fascist the Marinetti who declared, in the first Futurist manifesto (1909), "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene," we must look at the context in which such statements were made. The publication and exhibition history of *La Prose du Transsibérien* may provide us with some interesting leads.

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Neither Blaise Cendrars nor Sonia Delaunay considered themselves Futurists: indeed, Cendrars repeatedly insisted that, as he put it in a letter to André Salmon (12 October 1913): "The inspiration of this poem [*La Prose du Transsibérien*] came to me naturally and...has nothing to do with the commercial agitation of M. Marinetti." But despite such disclaimers—disclaimers that, as we shall see, were largely prompted by the strong nationalist rivalries of the period—*La Prose du Transsibérien* can be taken as a kind of hub of the Futurist wheel that spun over Europe in the years of *avant guerre*.

Consider the publicity campaign launched by Cendrars on behalf of his poem. Its September 1913 publication was preceded by a flurry of leaflets,

subscription forms, and prospectuses announcing the impending publication of "le Premier livre simultané," whose height would rival that of the Eiffel Tower. The word "simultané" predictably aroused the anger of the Italian Futurists, whose own manifestos had regularly advocated simultaneity: in the words of Boccioni's 1912 manifesto, "The simultaneousness of states of mind in the work of art: that is the intoxicating aim of our art." By *simultaneity*, Boccioni and his fellow painters meant "the synthesis of *what one remembers* and of *what one sees*," the possibility of representing successive stages of motion in linear sequence, as in Giacomo Balla's famous *Dynamism of a Dog in Motion* of 1912. The "Rayonism" of the Russian Futurist painters Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova was a similar call for the depiction of simultaneous motion, of dynamism and speed.

Sonia Delaunay's term "*couleurs simultanés*," on the other hand, refers, in the first place, to something quite specific: M. E. Chevreul's 1839 treatise *De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* from which Robert Delaunay derived his doctrine of "simultaneism" as the dynamic counterpoint of otherwise dissonant colors when observed in complementarity. Again, *La Prose du Transsibérien* is a "simultaneous" book in that the reader takes in, or is meant to take in, text and image simultaneously; the eye travels back and forth between Delaunay's colored forms and Cendrars's words. Third, *simultaneity* here refers to the spatial and temporal distortions that, as we shall see, characterize *La Prose du Transsibérien*, a poem that collapses present and past, the cities and steppes of the Russian orient and the City of the Tower, the Gibbet, and the Wheel, which is Paris.

Cendrars seems, in any case, to have relished the controversy generated by the circulars for *La Prose*. For one thing, it brought such poets as Apollinaire to his defense. In *Les Soirées de Paris* (15 June 1914), the latter reports:

Blaise Cendrars and Mme Delaunay-Terk have carried out a unique experiment in simultaneity, written in contrasting colors in order to train the eye to read with one glance the whole of a poem, even as an orchestra conductor reads with one glance the notes placed up and down on the bar, even as one reads with a single glance the plastic elements printed on a poster.

The poem-painting as a kind of advertising poster—here is the analogy at the heart of Marinetti's *parole in libertà*, the words-in-freedom arranged artfully on the page in different sizes, typefaces, and colors. But the transformation of the conventional page found in *La Prose*—a transformation I shall consider later—is specifically related by Cendrars himself to the layout of the "luminous" billboard. "The flower of contemporary life," as he playfully calls advertising, in a short piece called "Advertising = Poetry" (1927), "is the warmest sign of the vigor of today's men—indeed, one of the seven wonders of the world."

Have you ever thought about the sadness that streets, squares, stations, subways, first class hotels, dance halls, movies, dining cars, highways, nature would all exhibit without the innumerable billboards, without show windows (those beautiful, brand new toys for thoughtful families), without luminous signboards, without the false blandishments of loudspeakers, and imagine the sadness and monotony of meals and wine without polychrome menus and fancy labels.

Luminous signboards and polychrome menus—it is thus that “art” and “life” are destined to become one. To announce the publication of his own *La Prose du Transsibérien*, Cendrars published a manifesto in the September 1913 number of Herwath Walden's avant-garde Berlin periodical *Der Sturm*:

I am not a poet. I am a libertine. I have no method of working. I have a sex.... And if I write, it is perhaps out of need, for my health, even as one eats, one breathes, one sings....

Literature is a part of life. It is not something “special.” I do not write by vocation. Living is not a vocation.... I have written my most beautiful poems in the great cities, among five million men—or, not forgetting the most beautiful games of my childhood, five thousand leagues under the sea in the company of Jules Verne. All of life is nothing but a poem, a movement....

I love legends, dialects, grammatical errors, detective novels, the flesh of whores, the sun, the Eiffel Tower, Apaches, good negroes, and that trickster of a European who makes fun of modernity. Where am I going? I have no idea, since I even visit museums....

Here is what I wanted to say. I have a fever. And this is why I love the painting of the Delaunays, full of sun, of heat, of violence. Mme Delaunay has made such a beautiful book of colors that my poem is more saturated with light than is my life. That's what makes me happy. Besides, think that this book should be two meters high! Moreover, that the edition should reach the height of the Eiffel Tower!

Here, playing the enfant terrible, Cendrars grandly dissociates himself from all poetic “schools” only to echo the Futurist doctrine that life and art are inseparable, that poetry demands violence and energy, that it is a kind of “fever” in which the life of the modern city merges with the exotic Other, the fantasy world of Apaches and “les bons nègres.” Like Rimbaud, whose prose the *Sturm* essay recalls, Cendrars is drawn to the offbeat, the erotic, the populist. But the urge to communicate directly with the masses, to play to the crowd—the urge that makes Cendrars, like Apollinaire and like Marinetti, extol advertising—gives a kind of hard edge to Rimbaud's more visionary mode. In a letter to Victor Smirnoff (December 1913), Cendrars insists: “The role of the new poetry is to throw one's treasures out the window, among the people, into the crowd, into life. I throw money out of the window.” And he quotes from his *poème élastique* “Contraste”: “Les fenêtres de



ma poésie sont grand'ouvertes sur les boulevards" ("The windows of my poetry are wide open to the boulevards").

Curiously enough, this was literally the case. During the fall of 1913 the Cendrars-Delaunay *Prose du Transsibérien* was exhibited in Paris (the annual Salon d'Automne), Berlin (the Herbst Salon), London, New York, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. It became not only a poem but an event, a happening. In St. Petersburg, the poet-painter Victor Smirnoff gave an accompanying lecture called "Simultaneous Contrasts and Plastic Poetry." At the *Montjoie!* exposition in Paris on 24 February 1914, Mme Lucy Wilhelm stood on a chair so as to recite the gigantic poem, which was hung on the wall. Beginning at ceiling level, she gradually bent her knees and finally sat down on the chair to read the conclusion.

Performance art, we would now call it. But even more remarkable is the way the "windows" of Cendrars's poetry "opened," so to speak, onto the boulevards of Berlin. Herwath Walden's *Der Sturm*, which began publication in 1910 with a weekly circulation of approximately thirty thousand, published such writers as Karl Kraus, Heinrich Mann, and August Strindberg, as well as the art work of the *Blaue Reiter* group and the manifestos of the Italian Futurists. Wilhelm Worringer's "On the Development of Modern Painting," Kandinsky's "Language of Form and Color," Boccioni's *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*—all these appeared in the pages of *Der Sturm*. Cendrars himself contributed a translation of Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes* and an essay on Henri Rousseau (both in 1913).

*Der Sturm* also sponsored major exhibitions in which the German Expressionists were shown side by side with Picasso and Delaunay, with Vladimir and David Burliuk and Natalya Goncharova. In the summer of 1913, Walden decided to organize a Herbst Salon, on the model of the Paris Salon d'Automne. According to Peter Selz, Walden traveled with "meteoric speed" (the speed, we might say, celebrated in Futurist art), through most European art centers from Budapest to Paris and assembled 366 paintings and pieces of sculpture by some ninety artists from fifteen countries. This was to be the last of the significant international exhibitions of contemporary art held in Germany before World War I. Accordingly, the list of painters represented is significant:

FRANCE: Marc Chagall, Robert Delaunay, Sonia Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger, Jean Metzinger, Francis Picabia.

ITALY: Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Gino Severini, Ardengo Soffici.

RUSSIA: David Burliuk, Vladimir Burliuk, Natalya Goncharova, N. Kulbin, Mikhail Larionov.

AUSTRIA: Oskar Kokoschka.

HOLLAND: Five artists including Piet Mondrian.

SWITZERLAND: Members of the *Moderne Bund* including Paul Klee.

UNITED STATES: Lyonel Feininger, Marsden Hartley.

GERMANY: From *Der Blaue Reiter* group: Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, Alfred Kubin, Alexej von Jawlensky, August Macke, Gabriele Münter. From the younger generation: Hans Arp, Max Ernst.

More specifically, the Herbst Salon included Balla's *Dog on Leash*, Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, Kandinsky's *Composition No. 6*, Delaunay's *Solar Discs*, Léger's *Woman in Blue*, and Marc's *Tower of Blue Horses*.

It is in this international context that *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* by Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay made its first appearance. Cendrars, for whom German was as native as French, had close personal ties with the Expressionist poets and painters who were his contemporaries. The correspondence between Cendrars and Walden, between the Delaunays and Franz Marc, flowed steadily throughout 1913. "People of different countries," wrote Delaunay to Marc on 11 January, "get to like one another by seeing. In Berlin, I felt out of place only in terms of the language spoken there."

Yet within little over a year, the poets and painters of Delaunay's circle greeted the outbreak of war with Germany as both inevitable and desirable. Indeed, war, far from being extolled only by Marinetti's Italian Futurist circle, was, until 1916 or so, equated with revolution—the breaking of the vessels of oppression. Thus Kasimir Malevich could declare:

The academy is a moldy vault in which art is being flagellated.

Gigantic wars, great inventions, conquest of the air, speed of travel, telephones, telegraphs, dreadnoughts are the realm of electricity....

The new life of iron and the machine, the roar of motorcars, the brilliance of electric lights, the growling of propellers, have awakened the soul, which was suffocating in the catacombs of old reason and has emerged at the intersection of the paths of heaven and earth.

If all artists were to see the crossroads of these heavenly paths, if they were to comprehend these monstrous runways and intersections of our bodies with the clouds in the heavens, then they would not paint chrysanthemums.

It was a lesson Cendrars and Delaunay did not have to learn: the "roar of motorcars, the brilliance of electric lights, the growling of propellers" was precisely their subject, even as it was the subject of Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. But the darker implications of this new technology, imperfectly understood by the artists of the *avant guerre* themselves, are expressed, however subliminally, in their poetry and painting, their collage works and artist's books.

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*I have deciphered all the confused texts of the wheels and I have assembled the  
scattered elements of a most violent beauty  
That I control  
And which compels me.*

The "assembl[ing] of the scattered elements" of which Cendrars speaks involves, of course, the original typography and layout of the text as well as Sonia Delaunay's painted *pochoir* accompaniment. In recalling the train's approach to Mongolia, Cendrars declares:

If I were a painter I would spill great splashes of yellow and red over the end  
of this trip  
Because I am quite sure we were all a little mad  
And that a raging delirium was bloodying the lifeless faces of my  
travelling companions.

"Great splashes of yellow and red" do turn up in Delaunay's "illustration" for the poem, but her interpretation of the journey emphasizes its life, movement, energy, and color rather than its darker undertones: if Cendrars's sun is "a fierce wound," Delaunay's is a gorgeous golden ball. But even this contrast is not quite accurate for Delaunay's painting is, of course, essentially nonrepresentational; she and her husband were among the first abstract artists of Europe. Her *Transsibérien* is a complex arrangement of concentric circles, ovals, triangles, and rectangles, whose brilliant opposition of colors is in itself the "subject" of the painting. A distinction Cendrars made in a 1914 article on Robert Delaunay applies equally well to Sonia:

Our eyes reach up to the sun.

A color is not a color in itself. It is a color only in contrast to another or to several other colors. A blue is only blue in contrast to a red, a green, an orange, a gray and all the other colors.

Contrast is not a matter of black and white, an opposition, a non-resemblance. Contrast is a resemblance. One travels in order to know, to recognize men, things, animals. To live with. One faces things, one does not withdraw. It is what men have most in common that distinguishes them the most. The two sexes are in contrast. Contrast is love.

It is this system of differences that characterizes Delaunay's color field. But her painting is not wholly nonrepresentational either. Without illustrating Cendrars's narrative, it nevertheless complements it. Thus we begin at the top with large blue and violet discs and a vertical white tower shape—a kind of abstract Moscow, the city of the one thousand and three bell towers and the "great almonds of the cathedrals all in white." Patches of red and yellow in the top quadrant suggest Red Square and the golden sun, or



again the Kremlin "like an immense Tartar cake / Frosted in gold" and the "honeyed gold of the bells."

As the eye moves downward, it travels over a rainbow-colored world of whirling suns, clouds, and wheels—a vision, perhaps, of the Trans-Siberian journey as seen not from a moving train but from an airplane, a kind of unfolding aerial map. Paradoxically, as Pierre Caizergues remarks, the vertical axis is the privileged one, even though everything in the poem celebrates horizontality, the spatialization of time. Indeed, the vertical-horizontal opposition is an example of what Cendrars calls simultaneous contrast. Delaunay's emphasis is on motion, circular form, color; her long sinuous ovals recall both machine parts and phalluses. These whirling forms descend, finally, on a little red toy version of the Eiffel Tower penetrating an equally childlike rendition of the Great Wheel.

At one point in the poem, Cendrars compares the rhythm of the speeding train to "Le ferlin d'or de mon avenir" ("The golden thread of my future"). This "golden thread" can be seen running from top to bottom of Delaunay's painting, curving in and out and finally materializing as the three-quarter halo that acts as the rim of the abstracted wheel. Again, golden threads and red ones, as well as large planes of pastel colors—rose, light blue, light yellow, violet, pale green—are inserted between the verse paragraphs and lines of the poem so as to destroy the continuity of the whole as uniform text. The resultant blocks of print, surrounded by color forms, display their own internal contrasts: the lettering shifts from roman to italic, uppercase to lowercase, black to red, light to dark, and so on.

There is not, of course, a one-to-one correspondence between typeface and a particular emotion or theme. But notice that what is probably the key turn in the poem—the abandonment of the [Trans-Siberian] journey and sudden "cut" to Paris—is printed in large black block letters and that the apostrophe to Paris that follows has a justified right rather than a justified left margin, heavy typeface being reserved for the references to color: "du rouge du vert," "du jaune," "Jaune." The second "O Paris" passage is juxtaposed to the first by the shift from a justified right to a justified left margin, the page thus opposing two rectangular forms that almost meet at midpoint, surrounded by equal amounts of white space.

What is the effect of this visualisation of the page? It implies, I think, a *mise en question* of the text's lyric frame, its generic identity as lyric poem as well as its semantic coherence. For Delaunay's painting, far from matching the verbal text to be illustrated, undermines its meanings: her version is everywhere brighter, sunnier, more positive, more optimistic than is Cendrars's voyage into the world of war. Indeed, in Delaunay's painting, the war remains an absence; the technological world, the world of propellers and

air balloons, of engines and steel towers, is bright and beautiful even as we will see that machine world represented by the early Léger or Tatlin. Delaunay's version of *La Prose* draws out, so to speak, the international side of Futurism, the productive energy and vitality that the verbal text, with its precise delineation of place, has already questioned. To put it another way: Paris, the brilliant and vibrant international center of the *avant guerre*, is juxtaposed to the Trans-Siberian journey that will finally destroy it.

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