

COLIN BROWNE / Translating Vancouver

Apollinaire's "Les fenêtres" was originally published in Berlin in January 1913 in the catalogue for an exhibition by painter Robert Delaunay. The version included here replicates that first printing, which differs slightly from later versions. In the original hand-written manuscript, the word "Vancouver" does not have its own line but occurs as "Étincelant diamant Vancouver." Subsequent versions enhance the poem's open text by breaking the line in two. In the original hand-written manuscript, "Vancouver" occurs only once. The horizontal list of simultaneous locations in the third last line, a form of reprise, was added in Apollinaire's hand while proofing the poem. In the Delaunay catalogue the line reads, "Paris Vancouver Lyon Maintenon New-York et les Antilles" and we have retained this version. The poem has occasionally appeared without the hyphens in "pi-hi" and "New-York"; we have retained Apollinaire's original hyphenated orthography and his original upper case punctuation.

Blaise Cendrars' "Vancouver" appeared in a collection entitled *Kodak (Documentaire)* published in Paris in June 1924. The conceit, related to cinema, is that the book is a travelogue and that each poem represents a sequence, or snapshot. Cendrars later wrote that he conceived of the poems as "photographies verbales, forment un documentaire . . ." It was assumed for many years that as an inveterate traveller he had spent time in Vancouver and recorded his impressions of the city. In the *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui* edition of Cendrars' poetry and prose (1948), Louis Parrot relates that Cendrars visited Russia in 1909, and from there travelled across the United States and Canada, earning his living as an agricultural worker and tractor driver in Winnipeg, and, indeed, "Printemps," one of the poems in *Kodak (Documentaire)*, situates itself in Winnipeg. Canada also appears in "Hommage à Guillaume Apollinaire" (1918), in which the poet imagines that future generations of children will be transformed by Apollinaire's poetic spirit, including those with a Canadian accent. Yet there's no evidence that Cendrars ever visited Canada. Of course, one does not have to visit a place to write about it; often it's better not to. In the case of "Vancouver," Cendrars drew most of the first stanza directly from the opening paragraphs of a chapter in his friend Gustave le Rouge's adventure novel *Le mystérieux docteur Cornélius*. (See Episode 11, "Coeur de gitane.") The second

stanza, with the shape-shifting Samoyeds, appears to be Cendrars' own. It turns out that most of the poems in *Kodak (Documentaire)* are collaged from le Rouge's novel, although this was not discovered until 1966.

Soon after the book was released, Librairie Stock, the publisher, was approached by the George Eastman Company and instructed to change the title. It resisted and the company threatened with a lawsuit. In the end, Librairie Stock was permitted to sell out the first edition as long as it changed the title in future editions. When the sequence was published subsequently in a volume of collected poems, Cendrars decided on a new title: *Documentaires*. In his explanatory note he added, "C'est peut-être aujourd'hui un genre nouveau."

Belgian poet Marcel Thiry's most famous poem, "Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver," provided the title for his first book in 1924. His writing has been likened to that of Apollinaire and Cendrars, but apart from an apparent interest in faraway destinations it couldn't be more different. "Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver" is a conventional, rhyming poem in eight parts that vacillates between colonial nostalgia for exotic locations, masculine erotic fantasies, and a world-weariness improbable in a young man of twenty-seven. What may not be true for Cendrars, however, may be exactly what occurred to Thiry in 1917. He and his brother were fighting with the Belgian army in Russia against German forces when the Russians fled the battlefield. The Belgian expeditionary force was recalled to France and the troops were sent home via Siberia, crossing the Pacific and very likely travelling across Canada, via Vancouver, before embarking from Montréal or Halifax. They reached Bordeaux in June 1918. Thiry is still remembered for the youthful ardour of "Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver"; his collected poems, published under the same title in 1975, won the Prix Littéraire Valéry Larbaud in 1976. Two sections are printed below.

Translations by Colin Browne. Many thanks to Michèle Smolkin for her assistance.

Les fenêtres (1913)

Du rouge au vert tout le jaune se meurt
Quand chantent les aras dans les forêt natales
Abatis de pi-his
Il y a un poème à faire sur l'oiseau qui n'a qu'une aile
Nous l'enverrons en message téléphonique
Traumatisme géant
Il fait couler les yeux
Voilà une jolie jeune fille parmi les jeunes Turinaises
Le pauvre jeune homme se mouchait dans sa cravate blanche
Tu soulèveras le rideau
Et maintenant voilà que s'ouvre la fenêtre
Araignées quand les mains tissaient la lumière
Beauté pâleur insondables violets
Nous tenterons en vain de prendre du repos
On commencera à minuit
Quand on a le temps on a la liberté
Bigorneaux Lottes Multiples Soleils et l'Oursin du Couchant
Une vieille paire de chaussures jaunes devant la fenêtre
Tours
Les tours ce sont les rues
Puits
Puits ce sont les places
Puits
Arbres creux qui enlacent les Câpresses vagabondes
Les Chabins chantent des airs à mourir
Aux Chabines marronnes
Et l'oie Oua-Oua trompette au nord
Où les chasseurs de ratons
Raclent les pelleteries
Étincelant diamant
Vancouver
Où le train blanc de neige et de feux nocturnes fuit l'hiver
O Paris

Du rouge au vert tout le jaune se meurt
Paris Vancouver Lyon Maintenon New-York et les Antilles
La fenêtre s'ouvre comme une orange
Le beau fruit de la lumière

—Guillaume Apollinaire

The Windows (1913)

From red to green all the yellow is spent
When macaws shriek in the forests they were eggs in
Pi-hi giblets
There's a poem to be written about the one-winged bird
We'll send it off by telephone
The trauma of it
It makes me weep a little
There's a pretty young girl among the girls of Turin
The poor young man who blew his nose on his white tie
You'll raise the curtain
And now the window's opening
Spiders when hands thread light
Unfathomable beauty parlour violets
We struggle in vain to find repose
We begin at midnight
When we have time, we have freedom
Winkles Lottes Multiples Soleils and a Sea Urchin Sunset
An old pair of yellow shoes by the window
Towers
Towers as streets
Wells
Wells as locations
Wells
Hollow trees that hug vagabond Câpresses
Chabins sing songs you'd die for

To fugitive Chabines
And the goose trumpet Waa-Waa is aimed north
Where raccoon hunters
Scrape pelts
Sparkling diamond
Vancouver
Where snow-clad trains and night fires flee winter
O Paris
From red to green all the yellow is spent
Paris Vancouver Lyon Maintenon New-York and the Antilles
The window blinks open like an orange
Beautiful fruit of light
—Guillaume Apollinaire

Vancouver (1924)

Dix heures du soir viennent de sonner à peine distinctes
dans l'épais brouillard qui ouate les docks et les navires du port
Les quais sont déserts et la ville livrée au sommeil
On longe une côte basse et sablonneuse où souffle un
vent glacial et où viennent déferler les longues lames du Pacifique
Cette tache blafarde dans les ténèbres humides c'est la
gare du Canadian du Grand Tronc
Et ces halos bleuâtres dans le vent sont les paquebots
en partance pour le Klondyke le Japon et les grandes Indes
Il fait si noir que je puis à peine déchiffrer les inscriptions
des rues où je cherche avec une lourde valise
un hôtel bon marché

Tout le monde est embarqué
Les rameurs se courbent sur leurs avirons et la lourde
embarcation chargée jusqu'au bordage pousse entre
les hautes vagues
Un petit bossu corrige de temps en temps la direction
d'un coup de barre

Se guidant dans le brouillard sur les appels d'une sirène
On se cogne contre la masse sombre du navire et par
 la hanche tribord grimpent des chiens samoyèdes
Filasses dans le gris-blanc-jaune
Comme si l'on chargeait du brouillard

—Blaise Cendrars, from *Kodak (Documentaire)* (1924)

Vancouver (1924)

The clock striking ten is muffled by thick fog that wraps
 itself like bunting around the docks and ships in the harbour
The wharves are empty; the city is lost in sleep
We walk along a low, sandy coast where glacial winds howl and long rollers
 unfurl from the Pacific
This luminous stain in the dripping darkness is the terminal
 of the Canadian Grand Trunk
And these bruised halos in the wind are mail boats destined for the Klondyke
 Japan and India
It's so dark that I can barely make out the street signs where, with my heavy
 satchel, I hunt for a decent hotel

Everyone has gone aboard
The oarsmen bend themselves to their oars as the cutter, loaded to the gunnels,
 ploughs through the waves
A little hunchback changes course occasionally, giving the rudder a push
Navigating blindly by the foghorn's cries
We bump up against the sombre mass of a freighter and on the starboard beam
 a team of Samoyeds is clambering up
Streaks in the grey-white-yellow
As if the ship is taking on fog

—Blaise Cendrars, from *Kodak (Documentaire)* (1924)

Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver (1924)

I

Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver,
Tu n'as pourtant fait qu'un banal voyage;
Tu n'as pas vu les grands perroquets verts,
Les fleuves indigo ni les sauvages.

Tu t'embarquas à bord de maints steamers
Dont par malheur pas un ne fit naufrage
Sans grand éclat tu servis sous Stürmer,
Pour désertier tu fus toujours trop sage.

Mais il suffit à ton orgueil chagrin
D'avoir été ce soldat pérégrin
Sur le trottoir des villes inconnues,

Et, seul, un soir, dans un bar de Broadway,
D'avoir aimé les grâces Greenaway
D'une Allemande aux mains savamment nues.

VI

Pour être encor sur ce transport
Qui ramenait aussi quelques femmes créoles,
Sur ce transport ayant à bord
Ces femmes, ces soldats vaincus et la variole,
Pour voir passer encore au bras d'un aspirant
Le flirt bronzé du capitaine
Qui portait avec art une robe safran
Comme un drapeau de quarantaine,

Pour souffrir encor du vaccin
Du mal de mer et de l'altier dédain des femmes,
Et pour rêver de jeunes seins
Dans l'entrepont plein du confus chaos des âmes,

Pour entendre chanter encor dans les agrès
Les longs alizés nostalgiques,
Pour être encor ce vacciné du Pacifique
Tu donnerais, tu donnerais

—Marcel Thiry, from “Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver”

You who blanch at the mention of Vancouver (1924)

I

You who blanch at the mention of Vancouver,
It was a very ordinary trip;
You’ve yet to gaze upon the tall green parrots,
Indigo rivers, or savages.

You embarked on many steamers
None of them were even shipwrecked
You sweated, unnoticed, under Stürmer
You were too wise to desert.

It’s enough for your fragile pride
To have been a falcon-like soldier treading
The sidewalks of an unknown town,
And, alone one evening, in a bar on Broadway,
To have loved the Greenway graces of
A German girl with wise, uninhibited hands.

VI

To be at sea once more on the ship
That brought back a few Creole girls,
On that ship with its passengers—the women,
The vanquished soldiers and smallpox.

To watch once more as the midshipman passes by
Arm in arm with the Captain's favourite
With his golden skin and handsome saffron robe
Like a quarantine flag.

To suffer once more from the vaccines
Of sea sickness and women's proud disdain.
And to dream of budding breasts
In steerage, in the confused chaos of souls.

To hear again, singing in the halyards
The long nostalgic sigh of the trade winds,
To get a fix once more of the Pacific
I would give, I would give...

—Marcel Thiry, from "Toi qui pâlis au nom de Vancouver"