

COLIN BROWNE & IAN WALLACE / A Conversation

This conversation between Ian Wallace and Colin Browne took place in Ian Wallace's studio in Vancouver on April 4th, 2014. We had for some time wanted to discuss the poems by Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars that mention Vancouver. Why would these poets, who helped to transform poetry in the 20th century, mention a city that, in Apollinaire's case, was barely twenty-eight years old and so far away? What did it mean, and how did it relate to the spirit of Modernity?

Colin Browne: How did you first become interested Apollinaire's poem "Les fenêtres"? Was it the mention of Vancouver?

Ian Wallace: No, it was because I was first looking at visual poetry and the relationship to Mallarmé. I was trying to figure out why the early 20th century poets turned against Mallarmé when he was so obviously influential. It's as if Mallarmé was excluded from the discussion of Modernism until the 1920s. It seemed as though it was, "Kill the father."

CB: You have a copy here of the original poem as printed in the catalogue for Robert Delaunay's 1913 exhibition. Have you compared this with the standard version?

IW: Not really, no. But one thing that I found interesting was that Apollinaire removed all punctuation from "Les fenêtres." I have manuscripts of *Alcools* that show where he cancelled the punctuation.

CB: The absence of punctuation was significant when translating the poem.

IW: "Les fenêtres" was also one of the opening poems in *Calligrammes*, which was also without punctuation. Mallarmé had no punctuation in *Un Coup de Dés*. And this was one of the links that I was following through on. There was a discussion in December 1912, just before Apollinaire published *Alcools*, during which time he and Pierre Reverdy took a midnight walk from the Deux Magots to the river—Reverdy was a typesetter as well as a poet—and Apollinaire asked him about punctuation.

They were talking about Mallarmé and *Un Coup de Dés* and its lack of punctuation. After that, Apollinaire went back and removed all the punctuation from *Alcools*. This is a thesis I'm working on. The absence of punctuation is a trope of Modernity in poetry. It's like taking the framing away from a painting, or something like that. And, of course, classical French poetics was totally fixated on the twelve-syllable line—the Alexandrian line, punctuation, and a fixed form. The Modernists threw all that out the window, broke the lines up and the punctuation. And I see Mallarmé as the first adventurer, even though Mallarmé as a prose writer was a “commaphiliac” who used a comma just about every three words. Comma, comma, comma. That was the rhythm of his speech.

CB: I can already see some interesting changes here between the original handwritten draft of December 1912 and the first printing in 1913. This was written about the same time as “Zone.”

IW: “Les fenêtres” was published in January 1913, so it would have just followed “Zone.”

CB: Do you know why it's called “Zone”? In October 1912, Apollinaire joined Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp on a twelve-hour automobile trip to fetch Picabia's wife Gabrielle Buffet from her mother's house in the Jura. It was also meant as a little holiday, but the days were short and rainy and they were often stuck inside by the fire. Gabrielle's mother persuaded Apollinaire to read some of his poems, including one that was still in an early draft, which everyone admired. She'd already let everyone know that the locals referred to the district as *the zone*. When she asked Apollinaire what he was going to call the new poem, he replied, “I will call it ‘Zone.’” This is the trip that resulted in Duchamp's cryptic, prophetic text in which the five pistons/passengers in the car become five hearts that will give birth to a headlight child that will become a child god.

IW: Apollinaire was involved in another famous automobile trip in August of 1914, just before war broke out. They were in northern France and drove back to Paris overnight. The poem, entitled “La petite auto,” is drawn in the shape of a car and appears in *Calligrammes*.

CB: So, you first became interested in “Les fenêtres” because of Modernism, because of Delaunay, because of the lack of punctuation?

IW: Yes, just researching, and then I started wondering why Vancouver was mentioned in “Les fenêtres.” My big question is, why has Apollinaire mentioned Vancouver here, which goes on to another topic—I don’t know if you want to get into this now—about literary Cubism? Conversation poems?

CB: Well, what about Vancouver? I’m looking at the first proof made from the hand-written draft...and I don’t see, in this early proof, the familiar list of other locations at the end.

IW: Here it is, down here. “Lyon” ...here, on the right, he’s added the list of cities in his own hand....

CB: Oh, now I see—and look, there’s the hyphen in “New-York.” I’ve been curious about this hyphen and its occasional absence.

IW: I didn’t notice that. Thank you.

CB: And look, in the original hand-written draft, “Vancouver” was originally linked to “Étincelant diamant.” They’re on the same line.

IW: And here, where “the snow-clad trains...”; I’m sorry, I can’t read that word.

CB: It’s a different word, isn’t it?

IW: It’s like “tour.” I’ll have to get a magnifying glass.

CB: It’s a noun, and it’s something “of night fires....” But could it be a typographical note?

IW: You know where I think that train enters the poem? It is what was called a “conversation poem.” He wrote the poem while sitting in a bar. In other words, he’s dragging in elements of what people are saying around him, other clients in the bar. He’s looking at the walls. There are posters on the walls. At this time the CPR was producing travel posters, advertising railway tours across Canada through the Rockies. The style of these posters was borrowed, actually, from Swiss graphic design which advertised train travel through Switzerland. The CPR borrowed the same graphic ideas to advertise its own magical mountain train tours. What he’s looking at is a poster on the wall. This is a piece of research that I haven’t done yet. It would be fun to go to the Chung collection at UBC, because all the CPR

posters are there, to find a poster that would be an approximation. They've got 226 CPR posters and related materials. They're in Special Collections. We want to find one that advertises Vancouver and travelling through the mountains in a snowy landscape. At that time the trains had smoke stacks; that's the "nocturnal fire." I see a train speeding through the landscape with sparks coming out of the stack. Anyway, it's a beautiful image, but I think that's as close to Vancouver as it comes. It's only a poster on the wall! I think he just liked the sound of the word, too. And the list of locations at the end of the poem is like a chant, an invocation. He's a poet, and he's cobbling together... you see, he was very close to Delaunay who asked him to write a foreword to the catalogue. Instead he comes up with this poem, which bears a relationship to the work in the exhibition, especially the paintings Delaunay entitles "Fenêtres ouvertes simultanément," although we shouldn't lose sight of the arbitrary nature of collage happening in the poem. Apollinaire basically brackets, or rather, frames a constellation of seemingly irrelevant auxiliary elements with the image of prisms of light and colour coming in the window.

CB: I think this leads us to Cubism in poetry and Apollinaire...

IW: ...and to the idea of Modernist forms of literature at the time...and of course he was friends with Picasso, and so the whole discussion about Cubism was just coming up, and he's a poet, he's trying to understand Cubist collage, and collaging, and that's where Mallarmé comes in. Part of my thesis is that Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* was a collage poem, in effect, because when you read it, you've got to read through it on one level—line and size of text—and then you've got to read back through it on another level and then you're turning the pages back and forth. Constant inserts and shifts, both graphically on the page but also conceptually in the language itself. So what I'm looking at is where—how—Apollinaire is trying to construct a kind of Modernist poetics that borrows some of the inventions of the Cubist collage. I think that Picasso even borrowed some of the inventions of the Cubist collage from Mallarmé, from *Un Coup de Dés*. I haven't found the smoking gun specifically, but there are all kinds of connections to that.

CB: Collage, I think, is tied to Apollinaire's idea of the simultaneous. Simultaneity denies narrative. In the original proof he included "Vancouver" as a line, but how could he isolate one city when all cities exist simultaneously? He needed that list at the end. It's a Cubist planet.

IW: Consciously or not, one of Apollinaire's first calligraphic poems, "Lettre-Océan," was about radio transmission, KSF. Ocean-going ships at that time used radio telegraph systems to communicate. The world was shrinking. People were travelling, and so you have this collapse of space, of different environments coming into collision with each other. That's, of course, the essence of collage. It's the fragmentation of things pulled out from different fragments of space and pulled into a single harmonious body of work, or speech, or whatever.

CB: We should remember that the Eiffel Tower was saved only because it proved to be very useful for radio transmissions. They were going to tear it down!

IW: Then it became a symbol, and of course it's the main symbol in Sonia Delaunay's collaboration with Blaise Cendrars, *Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (1913). And of course that appears, along with the Ferris wheel, as seen from the window of Robert and Sonia Delaunay's apartment. They could see the Eiffel Tower and "la Grande Roue," the Big Wheel, which is also mentioned in the *Transsibérien*.

CB: And the Cubist aspect?

IW: I think that Cubism lurks in the background to all of this, especially when we get to looking at Cendrars and the question of appropriation, because literary Cubism is tied in with the Duchampian idea of appropriation, and of course Picasso's collages. Picasso cuts pieces out of newspapers and takes wallpaper off bathroom walls and builds collage and kind of pulls into a picture a whole variety of objects that are purely appropriated. I think that also occurs in poetry. To go back to Cendrars, he, in effect, has appropriated somebody else's text to discuss a city he's never been to.

CB: Can a text be a ready-made?

IW: In this case there is a ready-made aspect to it, and I guess it was a form of crossing the boundary line, going beyond what was expected at the time. William Burroughs is the classic example of collage literature, of so-called "literary Cubism" in effect. The two—collage and Cubism—were totally linked to each other, and also appropriation, at least what we now call appropriation. Duchamp called it the "ready-made."

CB: The borders seemed to be porous and generative between those poets and visual artists. Cendrars' poem "Vancouver" appeared in a 1924 collection called *Kodak (Documentaire)* which is meant to be like a snapshot album made up of what he called "photographies verbales," apparently the result of his ramblings about the world. For years readers believed that Cendrars had visited Vancouver and the other geographic locations in the book. In fact, most of the text was generated and appropriated from his friend Gustave le Rouge's adventure novel *Le mystérieux docteur Cornélius*. If the documentary genre is now regarded as being as suspect, Cendrars may have been one of the first to ring the alarm.

IW: When I came across the Cendrars poem about Vancouver, it was because I was researching Cendrars, Sonia Delaunay, and *Prose du Transsibérien* in relation to visual poetry and Mallarmé, looking again for the outfall of Mallarmé's work. I read it and I was quite fascinated and surprised to see a poem about Vancouver by Cendrars, thinking that he'd actually been here. He'd been to Russia earlier, and I came across a reference to his having spent time on the farm of an uncle in the Winnipeg area. So I was thinking, maybe he came through Vancouver and then took the train from Vancouver to Winnipeg and from there to New York and then back to Paris. As it turned out that wasn't the case. In fact, it might not even be the case that he was in the Winnipeg area. So, who knows? I haven't followed through on any further research to work that one out. But when I read the details of the poem, there were things that didn't quite make sense in terms of what I know about the Port of Vancouver back in 1910 or 1909 or whenever it was supposed to have been. Or later. It just didn't fit the geography. I was always wondering about that. What's he talking about?

CB: I'm pretty sure that Gustave le Rouge had never been to Vancouver either.

IW: He probably just read a tourist brochure or something! It's quite possible. They were imagining or fantasizing about Vancouver, but not about what was then the rather cluttered waterfront of a shabby port town. It was actually a bustling modern city, because if you look at the architecture of downtown Vancouver between 1886, when it burned down, and 1914, a lot of those early buildings were already built—it was an almost instant downtown. The highest building in the British Empire was right there, the old Vancouver Sun building at the corner of Beattie and West Pender, close to Victory Square. So Vancouver wasn't exactly a

wilderness port at the time, even though it was a modern city in flux. But this is not how it's described in the poem, so the poem didn't quite synch up. And then there are a few lines in the poem that don't quite make sense, for example, "Rowing out to the ship," because, if you look at the old photos, the ships were pulled up to wharves. They had to load heavy lumber, and you didn't row the lumber out to the boat! Hunting for a decent hotel I can imagine, with a heavy satchel, it was so dark he could hardly make out.... The terminal for what Cendrars called the "Canadian Great Trunk" would be the Main Street terminal built for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, which later became part of the Canadian National Railway.

CB: Anyone who has written fiction knows that you don't have to visit a place to describe, in a few lines, something that will support or subvert the intentions of the text. Cendrars is challenging our ideas about the poem, the metonym, and the nature or function of representational verisimilitude. What difference does it really make if he was here or not?

IW: The odd thing is that Vancouver, the city we live in and know all too well, was actually in this early Modernist literature a city of fiction. It's totally fictional. It's a phantasm, it's not a reality. I'm just thinking about why Vancouver might appear in this poem. It must have been in the air, one of these modern cities that pops up on the edge of the frontier, which it was at that time, and it enters into the discussion of Modernity at an international level. I think that's true. People were coming from India and China, so the name Vancouver as a port must have been known in the Far East as well.

CB: And of course Cendrars is simply going through a novel, culling descriptive phrases....

IW: I don't think it's a great poem.

CB: What interests me is that the first verse is appropriated and the second verse is entirely his. He invents a boat filled with passengers being rowed out to the ship by a "little hunchback," and the Samoyeds like "streaks of fog." It's a form of collage.

IW: It is collaging, and he's trying to create an image of internationality that was not just French, but a trope of Modernity; it was an idea about global travel. Citroën sponsored a car tour across Asia, from Paris to Peking, I think it was, in 1934. Paris

to Peking. This is an example of the idea of using modern transportation to create new routes around the world in the unknown world. Also through Africa. There were attempts to drive across the Sahara in these automobiles. It's a late form of colonialism. Just before the colonial powers pulled out of Africa and Asia they were playing with the whole idea of these exotic environments. I think that *Kodak (Documentaire)* was a literary version of modern global travel, done on the level of, in this case, fantasy.

Cendrars was, I think, a roughneck, basically. He was a bit like the Henry Miller or Kerouac of French literature in that sense. I don't think he cared whether he was telling the truth or not, or whether everybody would believe him or not. His writing...he was just producing. If you liked it you liked it, that's great; if you don't, then who cares?

CB: The book cheerfully undermines the conventions of the poem, the snapshot, the travelogue, and the documentary while remaining charming in its cloak of pseudo-authenticity which, like the emperor's new clothes, now stands revealed. We face an allegory of the production of meaning.

IW: To return to Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés* is such an amazing poem. The original manuscripts are still there with his corrections and everything, and the version he intended was published finally through the interventions of his daughter and her husband in 1914 by Les Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française. I see it as the fountainhead, the beginning of everything like abstraction, Cubism, appropriation, the ready-made, you name it; it is a poem about the destiny of the poet and the disaster of civilization, the disaster of culture. He uses all the tropes of Modernity including newspaper headlines, even though he's always attacked as being anti-journalistic and opposed to popular culture and popular newspapers. He borrowed poster design and newspaper design for the poster for the book. But of course the amazing thing about the Mallarmé research is that it's led into so many other avenues, and Paris was really the centre of the avant-garde of Europe. It was like a magnet.

CB: We have a third poem to look at by Marcel Thiry, the Belgian poet. We'll only print two parts of it. It's a rumination that ends up in an armchair, a fantasy of exotic and erotic longing. He begins by saying, "You grow pale just thinking of

an ocean trip to Vancouver, but that's nothing," then off he goes. Vancouver, he declares, is a bourgeois destination.

IW: I wonder how much the use of native totem poles and native iconography would have been part of the marketing of Vancouver at the time.

CB: They were here. The city raised the first four poles in Stanley Park in 1923. In André Breton's foreword to Wolfgang Paalen's 1938 exhibition in Paris, Vancouver is imagined as a place bristling with totem poles.

IW: Breton hadn't been here either! A few years ago in Paris, I ran into Marcia Crosby. She said, "Oh, Ian, guess what! I just went...." It was down by the Seine where they have the bookstalls, and we were in some kind of symposium at the École des Beaux Arts which is right there too, and she says, "Guess what! I went there and—'Do you have any postcards of Indians?'—and they said 'Yes,'" and she said, "Do you have any postcards of Indians from British Columbia? The west coast?" And they said "Yes," and she went through the postcards and found some of northern BC at turn of the century. One was of her grandfather's village on Haida Gwaii. I have a big collection of postcards, too, from that period. So postcards were circulating internationally; that carried a lot of this. I have quite a few of Vancouver that were written and sent back and forth.

CB: With this Thiry poem I don't really know what to say, although perhaps it owes something to the Mallarmé of "Brise Marine." It's a comment on unfulfilled bourgeois life, but its exotic fantasies seem to disregard the colonial machinery of cruelty and slavery that make bourgeois life possible.

IW: So none of these poems are specifically about Vancouver, except that Vancouver, in the framework of what we're looking at as the meme of a modern city on the edge of the frontier, signifies something, via the sound of the word, or signifies something in the poetic imagination that has to do with Modernity and—I call it collage—synthesizing disparate experiences and reinterpreting them through the literary model. In the visual arts there's also very little reference to Vancouver as a city. Emily Carr comes back in 1912 after Paris and just paints a row of old wooden houses and a bit of shrubbery on West Broadway, up near Broadway and Granville. She doesn't relate to the small beginning of an urban city. What I'm curious about is how all the visual arts and the artists of Vancouver turn their eyes

away from the city as a city. Like Emily Carr they were looking at the forest. There was no iconography of the city as such. Robert Delaunay's paintings of the Eiffel Tower and modern urban structures of the modern city, and early photography, like Stieglitz with *Camerawork* and Edward Steichen's photograph of the Flat Iron building, are examples of imagery of the city as a city, as an urban universe, rather than as a place somewhere plunked in the forest—from which to focus on the forest. Even Apollinaire's focussing in his poem on an exotic idea of nature, including the Canada geese, the Wa-Wa-Wa of the geese going by and the cabins and the beaver hunters and, are they beaver hunters? Yes...the rat hunters....

CB: In the French it's "raton" which is "little rat." We don't have a specific word for that.

IW: "Castor" is beaver in French.

CB: Some people have suggested a raccoon.

IW: They refer to a raccoon as a "raton."

CB: What do you think? Do you think it should be "raccoon"?

IW: Yes, I think it's probably "raccoon." Because he's talking about....

CB: Maybe I'll change it. "Raccoon hunters."

IW: What I'm trying to do is get a sense of what is the significance...back to my first question—why is Apollinaire mentioning Vancouver? I think it's, as it turns out, quite arbitrary. The arbitrariness is already interesting because it is an insight into a certain kind of Modernity of thinking about what a poem could or could not be.

CB: It may be less arbitrary than the other locations in the poem, if there's a poster.

IW: Oh, I see. Because he didn't include the other locations until later. The best one of these three is "Les fenêtres," I think. It's a superior poem.

CB: I do like the way that Cendrars ends with a vision of the dogs becoming a streak of fog, the colour of fog, as if the ship is loading on fog, is taking on fog. The final image is a cinematic image, a moving streak that dissolves from dog to fog....

IW: It's got this surrealist kind of shifting in a shifting morphology—shape shifters.... So he's closed his eyes and he's actually seeing something. But that could have been taken from some other source, too.

CB: He could have found it anywhere.

IW: Vancouver used to be much foggier than it is now. It was like London. All the wood-burning and all the smokestacks from the lumber, remember? False Creek was full of lumber and beehive burners.

CB: In Cendrars' poem, because of "the fog," we see a city but we never "see" it. We hear its foghorns. He's telling us something critical about the unreliable nature of the text—and by corollary, of the photographic image—as evidence. Simultaneously, he's celebrating the imagination and its ability to penetrate the fiction of the real. And he's riffing on the aural/alchemical disposition of our five consonants and four vowels.

IW: My interest in this theme is really, in a sense, about Modernity. The idea of cities on the margin as a trope of Modernity. This is it really, to put it in a nutshell. And Vancouver is one of those cities on the margin. It had a place in the trope of Modernity. A very slight place, I'd say, but still, it was there, then it kind of opens up into an early relationship to what we would now call Post-Modernity, or de-centering—how Modernity, both in communications and transportation and the shifting of populations and the poetic imagination in this place, reads out places that it doesn't know, like places on the frontier. I'm thinking about these terms as tropes of Modernity.

CB: In this light, Vancouver was a way-station, a perch in unceded Salish territory, offering the promise of refuge and prosperity to visitors and immigrants. But it was also called Terminal City, a name that juggled prosperity with despair. It could be the place where one might board a ship to exotic destinations, but, equally, with a roll of the dice, it might turn out to be the end of the line. I think we see in these poems that early on there were intimations of Vancouver's destiny as an in-between place. Is this another trope of Modernity?