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## Quels Rires: Blaise Cendrars and la Petite Guerre

Gerard Connolly

*Institute of Technology Tallaght*, [gerard.connolly@ittdublin.ie](mailto:gerard.connolly@ittdublin.ie)

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## Gerard Connolly

### ***Quels Rires!:* Blaise Cendrars and la petite guerre.**

It is only in times of national crisis (real or imagined) that the chasm between the daily life of the governing class and that of the governed truly makes itself known. In arguably the most sublime of his shorter works, “The Great Wall of China” (1931), Franz Kafka deftly conjured up the eerily familiar scenario of absurdity visited upon the lives of ordinary citizens, courtesy of the political elite. Kafka’s narrator is a village-dweller from the south-east of China who has been summoned by “the high command” to work on the construction of a section of the Great Wall. The narrator is aware that, given the dimensions of the plan, he will never see its completion in his lifetime. He is also conscious of the fact that there are other workers, simultaneously building other stretches of the wall, hundreds of miles away, about whom he knows nothing. As to the purpose of the wall, he does not deny that it is to serve as protection against an essentially mythical enemy. Nor does he fail to realise that, communications being so tenuous across that massive terrain, by the time any new messages have reached his village from command central, it is entirely possible that the government may have since been usurped by a completely different “high command”, thus rendering even more ridiculous these *communiqués* from a deposed regime. Stoically, he admits that his life is to be squandered on an ultimately pointless project; that he is acting upon the decree of people he has never met and has absolutely no reason to respect or take seriously. And yet the conclusion is implicit: what is one anonymous bricklayer compared with the profound *solidity* of the State? The State is here to be distinguished from mere government. While royal houses and political parties die off eventually, the supernatural concept of the State endures. Though random transients may, from time to time, lay claim to its authority, the god-like State is utterly indifferent to their unseemly squabbles and cannot tell these pretenders one from another. As Kafka’s narrator muses so perceptively:

The Empire is immortal, but the Emperor himself totters and falls from his throne, yes, whole dynasties sink in the end and breathe their last in one death-rattle. Of these struggles and sufferings the people will never know; like tardy arrivals, like strangers in a city, they stand at the end of some densely thronged side street peacefully munching the food they have brought with them, while

far away in front, in the market square at the heart of the city, the execution of their ruler is proceeding.<sup>1</sup>

While the State has taken over the main thoroughfare for its pompous, bloody, changing-of-the-guard, it is on the side-streets of the city that real life is to be found; and though the immortality of Empire is never questioned in the writings of Blaise Cendrars, the superiority of the least of Kafka's bedraggled packed-lunch bearers over the ghastly agents of the State is a similarly tacit *fait accompli*. And Cendrars too, by implication at least, gloomily acknowledges the impossibility of a life untouched by politics.

In a volume of memoir, *L'homme foudroyé* (1945), Cendrars allows us a glimpse of a world, and furthermore a particular type of *person*, effaced by the Great War. Here again, we find ourselves on the margins of society; in this instance, the dingy, mournful canal banks of eastern Paris circa 1907, where, as a young man, he beguiled an idyllic summer with the beautiful Antoinette, in a memory touched by a rare expression of sadness over the loss of his right arm, blasted off in combat at Champagne in 1915:

Quelle merveille, elle s'appelait Antoinette et moi, Blaise!...

J'avais vingt ans, elle, dix-sept.

Nous nous roulions dans l'herbe.

Je la serrais dans mes bras car j'avais encore mes deux bras...

[...]

Tout le monde nous connaissait sur les deux rives du canal et quand nous entrions dans un des bouchons de la berge manger une friture, boire une chopine de vin blanc ou faire une partie d'escarpolette, on nous y accueillait avec des sourires de complicité.<sup>2</sup>

[How marvellous it was, she was called Antoinette, and I, Blaise!... I was twenty years old, she was seventeen. We rolled in the grass. I held her close in my arms, for I still had my two arms then... [...]] Everybody on both banks of the canal knew us and when we went into one of the canalside taverns to eat

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China" in *Metamorphosis & Other Stories* (London: Vintage Classics, 1999) p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *L'homme foudroyé* (Paris: Folio, 2004) p. 217.

fried fish, drink half a litre of white wine or for a game of slap and tickle, we were welcomed with knowing smiles.]<sup>3</sup>

Antoinette's father is a diver, at that moment working on the reinforcement of the supporting arches of a railway bridge and she, Blaise, and an old carter known as "le père François" spend many happy hours by the water in the company of this man and his boisterous young colleagues.

C'était le bon temps. On parlait d'autre chose que de politique. Ces ouvriers étaient encore des hommes libres. Ils avaient du temps à perdre. [...] C'était des gais lurons. Le travail n'était pas une corvée. C'est la guerre de 1914 qui a mis fin à cet état de choses, tuant tous les braves petits gars indépendants pour ne laisser vivre que les saligauds de politiciens et les braillards débrouillards des syndicats. Quelle perte pour la poésie ! Depuis, on ne peut plus s'entretenir avec un homme du peuple ni échanger trois mots avec un ouvrier. On ne parle plus le même langage. C'est la guerre des classes en France, la guerre des mots. L'accent y est, mais pas l'esprit. On est dans les abstractions. Il s'en dégage de la haine.<sup>4</sup>

[Those were good times. We spoke of other things than politics. Those workmen were still free men. They had time to spare. [...] They were gay young dogs. The work was not drudgery. It was the war of 1914 that put an end to this state of affairs, killing off all the brave, independent young fellows and sparing only the sons-of-bitches of politicians and the scheming trouble-makers of the syndicates. What a loss for literature! Since then, it has become impossible to converse with a man of the people or to exchange a couple of words with a labourer. We no longer speak the same language. It is the class war in France, a war of words. The accent is there but not the spirit. One is amongst abstractions. They smoulder with hate.]<sup>5</sup>

*One is amongst abstractions*: this passage tells us a great deal about the spirit that propelled Cendrars' writing after the Great War, starting with *J'ai tué* in 1918. In contemplating these works, one cannot underestimate the influence of the Russian Revolution first of all, alongside the subsequent, slow-building battle of ideologies in the twenties and thirties that

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<sup>3</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *The Astonished Man*, translated by Nina Rootes, (London: Peter Owen, 2004) p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> *L'homme foudroyé*, p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> *The Astonished Man*, p. 136.

reached a crescendo in the Second World War. Cendrars had been in St. Petersburg on “Bloody Sunday” 1905, and while he would have naturally abhorred the killing of unarmed civilians by the Tsar’s forces, by the time of writing *L’homme foudroyé*, he has witnessed the rise of Bolshevism and the consolidation of the brutal Stalinist regime. In the same period that Cendrars is coming into his own as a writer, communism has become a plague on freedom that has already spread to his beloved France; most conspicuously in the form of the 1936 government of Léon Blum. Where once, as in the time of Antoinette’s father and le père François, working men operated independently and spoke to each other as individuals, now all communications are conducted via union representatives who understand only the party jargon of “rights” and “benefits”.

If there is one thing that is immutable in Cendrars’ otherwise slippery, shape-shifting *oeuvre*, it is its loathing of a life based on ideology. To understand this is to be less confused by his seemingly hopelessly paradoxical attitude to the Great War. Here is a man who, as a Swiss native, living in Paris, not only enlisted in the Foreign Legion the day after war was declared in July 1914, but publicly rallied his fellow ex-patriots to do the same, and would go on – in *La main coupée* (1946) – to boast of the surge in recruitment inspired by his call-to-arms. All the while, Cendrars the author has no difficulty decrying war in his books, ridiculing his own commanders, or, as seen above, despising the politicians that brought about the whole mess in the first place.

Still, it is important to note that *La main coupée*, written some thirty years after that fateful day at Champagne, “merely” takes us to the still-innocent early days of the war, the period that included the legendary Christmas truce of 1914. While Cendrars has nothing to say about this particular moment of trans-national camaraderie, his book sets up a similar opposition, not of French versus German, but of ordinary men versus commanders.

The Great War represents Western Europe’s first self-conscious foray into what was to become known as “total war”: an end to war as largely the domain of the professional soldier. Now, pale youths and the working class had been dragged in, to say nothing of the misfits that characterised the Legion. A dread of sentimentality has made us rightly suspicious of dwelling overmuch on the events of Christmas 1914, and yet, as shown in Modris Eksteins’ *Rites of Spring* (1989), in those early months, the top brass on both sides were clearly unsettled by displays of blue-collar solidarity across the lines. Eksteins suggests that such instances, though quite common, were largely omitted from official reports, along with brief

but significant bursts of out-and-out mutiny. On the Franco-German front at Champagne on Christmas Day 1914, the two sides found common ground in a shared contempt for senior officers. Furthermore, says Eksteins:

A German letter of December 27, captured by the French, told not only of extensive fraternization but of an incident observed by the Germans some days before, when French soldiers shot their own officer because he did not want to surrender in a hopeless situation, where death would have been the only reward for bravery. They murdered their officer and then surrendered.<sup>6</sup>

That such anecdotes are largely confined to private letters can be explained by the field commander's understandable fear of punishment at the hands of his superiors. Was the grip of the high command really so tenuous? To what extent did the military strategists – often at a comfortable remove from the flooded trenches, the rats and the gas - guide the course of the war? David Stevenson in his *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (2012) has Helmuth von Moltke the Elder admitting that “no plan survives the first contact with the enemy”<sup>7</sup>, while Stevenson himself concludes that while these plans “probably influenced the outcome less than did strengths in divisions and in guns”, nevertheless “they did determine where and how the opening battles took place, and their near unremitting failure to accomplish their objectives left the belligerents in uncharted waters”<sup>8</sup>

The theme of the bumbling cluelessness of officers dominates Cendrars' war writings. *J'ai tué* collapses a year of frontline experience into one long, seamless paragraph, opening in a maelstrom of sputtering locomotive engines, screeching piston-rods, iron wheels sending sparks into sidings, chains clanging as the narrator and his unit are mobilised to the front. Having disembarked from their carriages in the dead of night, marching away from an unnamed town, they pass a small villa, partially secluded by trees, with a light visible in one of the windows. By the outer garden wall, a carpet of fresh straw has been laid, which muffles the sound of their boots. Instinctively, they crane their necks in order to peer into the lighted room. A general is pacing back and forth amid a clutter of maps and charts. “C'est LUI,” whispers Cendrars to the reader with obvious sarcasm, “Ayez pitié des insomnies du Grand Chef Responsable qui brandit la table des logarithmes [...] Un grand calcul de

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<sup>6</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000) p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> David Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012) p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Stevenson, p. 45.

probabilités l'assomme sur place.”<sup>9</sup> [It's HIM. Have pity on the insomnia of the Great Leader brandishing his log tables [...] A thorny calculation has him rooted to the spot.]<sup>10</sup>

Leaving the general to his vital work, the men launch into a series of short, but impressively obscene, marching songs and then the shelling begins. Sentences puncture the page like a jackhammer: “Tout pète, craque, tonne, tout à la fois. Embrusement général. Mille éclatements. Des feux, des brasiers, des explosions. C'est l'avalanche des canons. Le roulement. Les barrages. Le pilon.”<sup>11</sup> [Everything bursts, cracks, thunders, all at the same time. All is ablaze. A thousand blasts. Fires, infernos, explosions. A shower of cannonade. The rumbling. The barrages. The shelling.]<sup>12</sup> The bombardment lets up. Time passes in the rain, crouched in the mud-filled craters left by the attack. At length, the order comes to advance. Almost on cue, as the commanders quietly slip away, leadership emerges of its own accord from the ranks:

On est crispé. Mais on marche quand même, bien aligné et avec calme. Il n'y a plus de chef galonné. On suit instinctivement celui qui a toujours montré le plus de sang-froid, souvent un obscur homme de troupe. Il n'y a plus de bluff. Il y a bien encore quelques braillards qui se font tuer en criant «Vive la France!» ou «C'est pour ma femme!» Généralement, c'est le plus taciturne qui commande et qui est en tête, suivi de quelques hystériques.<sup>13</sup>

[We're on edge. But move forward all the same, lined up and silent. The top brass have gone. All instinctively follow the one who has always shown the most sang-froid, often some lowly member of the troop. There is no more bluff. You still get one or two bawlers ready to die yelling “Vive la France!” or “This is for my wife!” Generally, it is the most taciturn who commands and who is out in front, followed by a few hysterics.]<sup>14</sup>

In its vivid depiction of the prelude to battle, with the various character-types falling into their natural, pre-ordained roles, alongside the earlier image of the general not wishing to have his nocturnal ruminations disturbed by the tramp of army boots, *J'ai tué* gives us a foretaste of the mission at the heart of *La main coupée*: a desire both to challenge the popular

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<sup>9</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *J'ai tué* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 2013) p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.

<sup>11</sup> *J'ai tué*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> My translation.

<sup>13</sup> *J'ai tué*, pp. 17-18

<sup>14</sup> My translation.

notion of “heroism” and to debunk any suggestion of the officer class as strategists, guiding their forces towards victory. Instead, they are presented as universally vain, pretentious, dishonest, and almost wholly divorced from the combat.

*J'ai tué* ends suddenly and violently, in a flash of plunging daggers, as the protagonist comes face to face with his German counterpart. In his study, *La main de Cendrars* (1996), Claude Leroy quotes these disturbing last lines:

Je saute sur mon antagoniste. Je lui porte un coup terrible. La tête est presque décollée. J'ai tué le Boche. J'étais plus vif et plus rapide que lui. Plus direct. J'ai frappé le premier. J'ai le sens de la réalité, moi, poète. J'ai agi. J'ai tué. Comme celui qui veut vivre.<sup>15</sup>

[I leap upon my antagonist. I strike him a terrible blow. It almost tears his head off. I killed that Kraut. I was sharper and faster than him. More direct. I struck first. I'm the one with a grip on reality, me, the poet. I acted. I killed. Like a man who wants to live.]<sup>16</sup>

As with *La main coupée*, Cendrars the war-memoirist seems largely uninterested in giving the public what they want. For Leroy, while the brutality of the scene serves as some kind of indictment of war, nevertheless, he acknowledges, many readers may feel themselves deprived of the reassurance of an outright condemnation.

Si *J'ai tué* inquiète, c'est d'être sans alibis pour le fournir en valeurs et en indignations. Or, le réquisitoire n'épargne personne, à commencer par le procureur lui-même. A qui assigner la responsabilité de la violence? A l'impérialisme allemand? Aux luttes du capitalisme? Aux formes de l'État? [...] Non, la violence est le propre de l'homme [...]<sup>17</sup>.

[If *J'ai tué* disturbs, it is in being unapologetic about its lack of values or indignation. As an indictment, it spares no-one, not even the prosecutor himself. Where to lay the blame for all this violence? On German imperialism? On Capitalist struggles? On forms of the State? [...] No, violence is characteristic of man.]<sup>18</sup>

Cendrars' acceptance of violence and war never seemed to overwhelm him with misanthropy or a sense of futility. As the Second World War dawns, he once again snaps into action and

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<sup>15</sup> *J'ai tué*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> My translation.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Leroy, *La main de Cendrars* (Villeneuve d'Ascq (Nord): Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1996) p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> My translation.



attempts to enlist, despite his age (fifty-two) and obvious physical impairment. Denied permission to serve, he briefly consoles himself with a post as a war correspondent before the Occupation clips his wings in 1940, exiling him to his house in Aix-en-Provence for the next four years. As the writing of *La main coupée* nears completion in late 1945, the author is informed that his fighter-pilot son Rémy has been killed over Morocco.

In the wake of personal tragedy and a horrific second war, *La main coupée*, finally published the following year, still manages to be both a chaotic, picaresque yarn and a loving tribute to the many odd characters befriended by Cendrars during his time in the Legion. Never shy of the limelight, with almost child-like candour, he assures us at length of his immense popularity with the other men who instantly elect him their corporal, arousing the envy of their preposterous, doltish “superiors”. Meanwhile, the poet Cendrars rejoices in the scabrous *badinage* of the men, is awe-struck by the majesty of the dawn over No-Man’s Land, and takes infinite pleasure and pride in “la petite guerre dans la grande”; that is to say, the pranks, the unsanctioned raids and acts of sabotage, undertaken by Cendrars and his friends under the noses of their commanders.

For the most part, officers are side-lined in the book, and when they do make an appearance, they are showered with contempt or worse. One such victim is the sensible, well-meaning sergeant-major Angéli who tries to counsel Cendrars against provoking his superiors, to stay out of trouble, rise through the ranks as Angéli himself has done, to think of his wife and child back home and start building a career in the army. What befalls this dull conformist shortly afterwards is simply too loaded with symbolism to be credible:

En pleine bataille, alors que nous poursuivions les Allemands que nous avions délogés du boyau des Marquises, où ils s'étaient désespérément accrochés, et que nous faisons un bond en avant, Angéli est tombé la tête la première dans des feuillées. Après le baroud nous revînmes à trois sur nos pas voir s'il avait réussi à s'en dépêtrer tout seul car nous n'avions pas eu le temps de lui porter secours dans le feu de l'action. Cela avait été un éclat de rire quand nous l'avions vu basculer dans le trou puant ; maintenant nous restions là, horrifiés. Angéli était mort asphyxié, la tête dans du caca allemand, les jambes au ciel. Une tinette débordante. Un ciel vide. Deux jambes écartées en forme de «V»<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée* (Paris: Denoël, 2002) p. 220-221.

[At the height of the battle, as we were pursuing the Germans we had dislodged from the communication trench of the Marquises, where they had held out desperately, Angéli fell head first into the latrines. After the battle, three of us retraced our steps to see if he had managed to extricate himself alone, for we had not had time to go to his aid in the heat of the action. There had been a great shout of laughter when we saw him topple over into the stinking ditch; now we stood there horrified. Angéli had died of asphyxiation, head down in the German shit, his legs in the air. An overflowing pit. An empty sky. Two legs straddled in the form of a V.]<sup>20</sup>

It is often difficult to gauge Cendrars' tone. Nevertheless, his description of Angéli as “ce cher homme, si sage, si pondéré, si tranquille, si sincère, propre et maître de soi comme un meunier, mais qui n'avait pas inventé la poudre,”<sup>21</sup> [that dear man, so wise, so ponderous, so serene, so sincere, so clean and self-possessed as a miller, and in no way to blame for the invention of gunpowder]<sup>22</sup> seems decidedly gloating. As to the passage quoted above, a more perfect example of the expression “rubbing one's nose in it” is hard to imagine. And yet, cruel though the fate of Angéli undoubtedly is – the pathetic victory-sign of his legs adding an extra twist of the knife – is derision not typically the reward of those we describe as “meaning well”? It is a phrase frequently uttered through gritted teeth or accompanied by a weary sigh: “I know he *means* well...” The hapless do-gooder goes where he/she is not welcome, is brimming over with tiresome advice rejected long ago, inspires an instinctive revulsion for the accepted wisdom he/she wishes to promote. We may never know if Angéli actually existed – this being a “memoir” by the shamelessly truth-stretching Blaise Cendrars – but we are left with the distinct impression that even if the sergeant-major himself was real, whatever the actual circumstances of his death, Cendrars would have made sure that it was “head down in the German shit.”

The life of Cendrars – like that of Angéli and Kafka's builder – is buffeted by the whims of a political cabal located thousands of miles away from him which doesn't even know he exists. Their decisions bring about the deaths of two of his children and leave him an invalid. Yet, for Cendrars, it is almost unthinkable to wage revolution against the endless cycle of slaughter or to drop his rifle in defiance. We are *all* caught up in this pulsating mass of

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<sup>20</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *Lice*, translator uncredited (London: New English Library, 1974) pp. 151-152.

<sup>21</sup> *La main coupée*, p.220.

<sup>22</sup> *Lice*, p. 151.

humanity, gathering speed, hurtling towards oblivion. We are necessarily tied into the angels as well as the architects of death. What matter if they do not know us? Unlike Angéli, Cendrars at least does not have to dance to their tune. He can simply carry on: write books and poems, laugh at them, perform a kind of alchemy on the agonies they visit upon him and – seventy years after writing *L'homme foudroyé* – inspire readers to follow his lead; to somehow find their way back, if only fleetingly, to the poetry of those moments by the Seine with Antoinette, her father, his cronies, and le père François.