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BETWEEN REAL AND FICTITIOUS TRENCHES:  
BLAISE CENDRARS, *THE BLOODY HAND*  
**Maria Tudosescu**

**Abstract:** The memoir lies somewhere at the crossroads between literature and document, offering a look into a shared past, but a very subjective one for that matter, obeying the voice of one author, who cannot write without creating some form of literature. As such, it becomes a very interesting literary genre: free to play with perspectives and with the senses of the reader, borrowing literary devices from fictional works, it is still deeply anchored in real life. The current article focuses on Blaise Cendrars' experience on the battlefields of the First World War as depicted in his memoir *The Bloody Hand*. First a writer, then a soldier, Blaise Cendrars could not escape the artist's natural instinct to turn his life into art, inviting the reader into his chaotic, fragmented, dirty, nostalgic, cruel, at times unbelievable experiences in the trenches. In order to better understand this intricate process of reviving memories and turning that very process into literature, the article proposes a look at the writer's use of literary devices - humour, surrealist elements, irony, metaphor or foreshadowing- to recreate an authentic, yet highly aestheticised war narrative.

### **1.1. Frédéric Louis Sauser in Search of Purpose**

Blaise Cendrars' biography reads, at times, more like a work of fiction than a true story: from his name to his journeys, to his stories, one can never be quite sure where the border of reality crosses that of fiction. The Swiss-French writer born in 1887 as Frédéric Louis Sauser starts writing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of the symbolist movement, attracted by the European current that had already inspired so many works of literature by the likes of Dehmel, Przybyszewski or Gourmont. The future poet leaves home in his early teenage years and travels around the world, from Russia to New York, where he first publishes poetry under the name of Blaise Cendrars.<sup>1</sup> Before the beginning of the war, he often finds himself wandering around without a certain purpose, working in various places, publishing different kinds of works, gathering important experience from his nomad existence that would end up influencing his literary style.

Then, in 1914, it would seem as if Blaise Cendrars is finally ready to commit to one cause: The Great War. On the 1st of August, when general mobilisation is declared in France, Blaise Cendrars finds himself

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<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Cendrars* in Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, Gallimard Folio, Paris, 1975, p. 438

among other intellectuals who urge young men to join the army and fight for their country. Moreover, he even signs an open letter to those other foreigners who, like himself, had been adopted by France and would be suited to join the Foreign Legion: “On the 29th of July 1914, two days after the declaration of war, I signed together with Riccioto Canudo, [...] an ‘*Appel*’ which was published in all Parisian newspaper and which had a great impact.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Foreign Legion, patched up by soldiers from different corners of the world, became a somewhat controversial part of the army.

On the one hand, it was one of the most successful French army forces during the Great War; on the other hand, more often than not, it seemed like “a chronicle of dropouts, of misfits, of refugees, of men commonly regarded as out of place in normal society.”<sup>3</sup> Their motives for fighting were, consequently, just as diverse and while some joined out of sincere belief in the French cause and out of genuine love for their adoptive country, Blaise Cendrars states, in a reply written down in his memoir, that he only went to war because of his deep hatred for the Germans.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the reason, it is nevertheless worth observing that, unlike many other soldiers, he and the other men fighting in the Legion were there solely by choice, because they wanted to take part in the war; they were never called to arms, they reached out for them - and most of them quickly regretted the decision.

## **1.2. Writers in and of the Trenches**

The poet who seemed determined to escape any limitations that reality would impose both in his life, by changing his name and therefore his identity, and in his writings, by innovatively combining symbolist, expressionist and Dada elements, was suddenly thrown into a real chaos of bold sounds and shocking images: the battlefield. Extremely destructive, the Great War was a failure of the modern spirit, a proof that progress always comes with a cost. Nevertheless, it must also be said that the experience of war greatly influenced the arts of the 20th century. Surely, the war motif had always been a source of inspiration for artists, long before 1914. However, what is particularly interesting, especially in the French army, is the emphasis that was suddenly put on witnesses’ accounts. Cendrars and many other soldiers, some of which had no connection to literature whatsoever, were encouraged to write down their daily experiences and were even published in special newspapers:

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<sup>2</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, Gallimard Folio, Paris, 1975, p. 140 (my own translation)

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1991, p.xiii

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 378 (my own translation)

“It became another facet of a soldier’s duty—culturally, morally, and aesthetically—to capture his experiences in written word. This conception of the soldier as writer took root in cultural antecedents from Third Republic educational reforms, which helped make French soldiers more receptive, indeed dedicated, to writing from the trenches. The trench newspapers embraced the concept, routinely encouraging soldiers to write their experience. This confluence of factors resulted in the creation of the term—*écrivain-combattant*—with particular resonance in the French context.”<sup>5</sup>

All of a sudden, it wasn’t just writers writing anymore; indeed, all those who took part in the battle were invited to express themselves. Which, of course, meant that an impressive number of accounts surged amidst one of the greatest conflicts in the history of mankind, providing intimate details about life in the gutter. Whether all of these can be considered literature is debatable. Nevertheless, they remain as testament to that unique experience, to be compared and even placed into dialogue with historical writing.

Blaise Cendrars was also among those who scribbled down his war experience since 1914, when he joined the Foreign Legion until September 1915, when he lost his right arm in battle. Reading his accounts, it seems as though the writer’s main purpose was not so much the description of the fight itself or of the surroundings, but rather finding the little humanity that was left amidst all the death: Blaise Cendrars is particularly concerned with the people he encountered in his serving time, creating a gallery of bizarre portraits of strange men, almost comically accentuating their most prominent feature, similar to a Van Gogh painting.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike those “writers of the trenches”, the poet kept his entries private even long after the war was already over: the writer only published his war memoirs in 1945, after the end of the Second World War. But, if he took his time, it was with good reason and when he did decide to publish, his memoirs became a valuable source of information: between 1945 and 1949 he publishes no less than four war memoirs: *The Astonished Man* (*L’Homme foudroyé*, 1945), *The Bloody*

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<sup>5</sup> Nichole T. Gleisner, *Soldier-Poet or Écrivain-Combattant: How the French Trenches of World War I Defined Witnessing*, *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41, 2, Article 10. <https://doi.org/0.4148/2334-4415.1929>, p. 1 (acc. 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Lovey, *La Situation de Blaise Cendrars*, Editions de la Baconiere, Neuchatel, 1965, p. 63

*Hand (La main coupée, 1946), Planus (Bourlinguer, 1948), and Sky (Le Lotissement du ciel, 1949).*<sup>7</sup>

It seems as though Cendrars had to give himself some time to ponder over his life in the trenches before he could turn that intense and confusing experience into literature. In fact, he is the one who explains his delay in turning real life into literature: “You are either combatant or writer. When you write, you don't shoot with a rifle and when you shoot with a rifle you don't write, you write afterwards.”<sup>8</sup> For the French writer, writing and fighting are two antithetic activities, which cannot be done simultaneously - or, at least, not well. War is felt, lived intensely, fought to the last breath and observed attentively; literature comes subsequently, when the senses calm down and the mind has time to make sense of the chaos: “On the battlefield, I was a soldier. I shot. I didn't write. I left that activity for my men, who never ceased to create, create, create, writing to their women.”<sup>9</sup> He clarifies this process of creation once again in his memoir, as he is recalling a conversation with a policeman, who is surprised that a poet would not be more inspired by the war, which, in turn, he finds sublime and a subject worthy of poetry. In his reply, Cendrars sums up his own opinion on it: “The war is filth [...] The dangerous life might be convenient to an individual, certainly, but on the social plan, it leads directly to tyranny [...]”<sup>10</sup>.

Overwhelmed by its intensity, the writer needs the experience of war to settle inside himself, before he can transform it in words, before he can restore it authentically, through literature. During his experience, he ‘stocks’ information, sensations and emotions in his mind, but only time can transform all that raw emotion into coherent fragments of literature. Perhaps the reality of war itself resisted its transformation into art and, aware of his limitations in reproducing the war truthfully, the writer needed time to create his own path, build a voice that would suit this strange reality, especially if it should focus on the stories of his dead fellow soldiers: “The war zone as elegiac space is a construct of postwar record narratives. [...] War itself, however, in its own time, has no time for elegy. The war zone is destructive of elegy, warping the time needed

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<sup>7</sup> Monique Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*, Twayne Publishers, by GK Hall & Co., Boston, 1980, p.15

<sup>8</sup> Blaise Cendrars cited by Jean-Claude Lovey, *La Situation de Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., 1965, p. 59

<sup>9</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 142 (my own translation)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-378

to mourn, forcing the mourner to put that impression away, to be pondered at a later time.”<sup>11</sup>

Unlike many other war memoirs of the Great War, which centre on the battles and follow a chronological plot, the four volumes of memoirs written by Cendrars remind the reader more of a collage than of a story, being

“an indissoluble continuum of reminiscences of people, places, readings, personal adventures lives or dreamt about, cross references to previous writings, reflexive pauses on the nature of writing or the directions the world and man are taking today, spiritual meditations, all woven into an intricate web through the consciousness of the author.”<sup>12</sup>

However, this artistic approach might be more useful in representing the reality of war than one might originally think –in order to represent such an experience as authentically as possible, writers might *need* to resort to different types of texts, especially an artist as enamoured with the surreal and the absurd as Cendrars. In fact, in her study about the Great War and its representation, Virginie Renard comments on this very aspect: “It seems that novels that evoke the First World War [...] *have to* borrow from the technique of the collage and incorporate other types of texts, as if literary prose alone could not convey a satisfactory image of the conflict.”<sup>13</sup> For Cendrars, the classical chronology does not serve the accuracy of war - it is too clean, too organised. Like the war itself, his memories are chaotic and scattered, a hodgepodge of battles and all the moments in between, centred on random, ordinary people, each with their own little universe of experiences. Spontaneously, following the course of each random memory that pops into his head, Cendrars writes as he remembers, simulating with his style the intricate workings of his memory.

### **1.3. *The Bloody Hand***

The book that I have chosen to focus on, *The Bloody Hand*, is the second part of the tetralogy of war memoirs, being the most elaborate and complex of the four. Published in 1946, the book is dedicated to Cendrars’ two sons, Rémy and Odilon, who were both killed in the

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<sup>11</sup> Adam Piette, *War Zones*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* by Vincent Sherry (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p.42

<sup>12</sup> Monique Chefedor, *Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., p. 113

<sup>13</sup> Virginie Renard, *The Great War and Postmodern Memory: The First World War in Late 20th-century British Fiction (1985-2000)*, Peter Lang Publishing, Bern, 2013., p. 299

Second World War. The first page of the book is covered in random texts (notes, a letter, a postal card) about and respectively from his son, Rémy, without any commentary; they are simply displayed at the beginning of the story, as if through them, Cendrars would also include his own son in his chronicles of war. Additionally, before diving into the story, the writer quotes a highly disputed biblical passage from Jeremiah's book: "The Lord has created a new thing on earth: the woman shall compass the man."<sup>14</sup> While he never reveals the meaning behind the chosen paragraph, it could be assumed that it refers to the reversed order of a world thrown into chaos, in which all the old, traditional values are thrown upside down.

As for the form of the book, it could be considered a bizarre kind of homage to the people Cendrars would meet during his serving time, in which retellings of stories are written down along with war songs, while bits of poetry make their way into fragments that describe a battle. Already in the second chapter, for instance, as the soldiers are described during their march, a war song is written down lyric for lyric<sup>15</sup>, letting the reader emerge into a world composed not only of words but of senses, where sounds and smells become just as important as images. The only thing that keeps all these dissipate fragments together to ultimately create a coherent account of the war is the narrator himself, not only as narrator, but as an active participant in the story, switching between being subject or object of his own narration. This double role, both as participant and observer, is also what links Cendrars to the other soldier writers and what gives him authority to claim accuracy for his stories:

"Accordingly, authority in twentieth-century memoirs is experiential rather than factual, and depends on 'voice' rather than eye-witnessing. It is assumed that anyone can know the facts, even if they were not there - indeed, eyewitnesses are not necessarily the best source for the facts. However, only those who experienced can know how it felt, and hence only they can speak with an authoritative voice."<sup>16</sup>

As I have already pointed out, it is harder to find a storyline in Cendrars' memoir than it is in other war memoirs. However, a quick look at the titles of the chapters can provide an insightful clue. Often enough the titles are names of the people that Cendrars fought alongside: Rossi,

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<sup>14</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 13 (my own translation)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 20 (my own translation)

<sup>16</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450-1600 (Warfare in History)*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2004, p. 68

Lang, Robert Bellesort, Goy and many others. Sometimes, these names are followed by an interesting piece of information: the place and cause of death of that particular character, as if the narrator would be creating funeral stones, at the feet of which he buries the stories of those who were lost. For example, before reading the chapter about Rossi, the reader is already made aware of the fact that he will be killed in Tillolo<sup>17</sup>, or before the story of Goy the reader finds out that he was made prisoner at La Croix and never found again<sup>18</sup>. A question that arises then is whether these people, these names that follow each other in the form of chapters, are just a pretext to write a personal story which can be easily hidden behind a stranger's name, or whether the whole process of writing these episodes is, in fact, a way of remembering those people and making them immortal - at least, in writing. Moreover, as one reads the unbelievably absurd stories that make up the reality of the author, one can't help but wonder how much of it all is the writer's embellishment (also considering the amount of time that passed between the events and the writing) and how much is the authentic, accurate experience.

For one, the memoir is undeniably about people: fellow soldiers who were lost in action, veterans, who remained scarred after the experience, the anonymous individuals who are no longer remembered for all they were: "The conflict is omnipresent in his [Blaise Cendrars'] work, but essentially he used the war events as a literary source for inspiration, as well as an original and inexhaustible way of telling stories about people."<sup>19</sup> This could be envisioned as a cry of the French writer against the impersonality of the war experience and its over-generalisation, when soldiers go from being individuals to being just a number, a barely human entity, lost among others: "In honouring the dead, survivors testified to their exclusion from the war's ultimate meaning - sacrifice - except vicariously as witnesses. The role of the living is to offer tribute, not receive it."<sup>20</sup> By singling them out from the crowd and giving them their own space in his memories, as well as in his memoirs, Cendrars fulfils his mission as a war survivor and lends his fellow soldiers a voice and therefore, a sense of self, making the point that "people remain the fundamental unit of historical experience and

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<sup>17</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 23 (my own translation)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 65

<sup>19</sup> Lauren Tatu and Julien Bogousslavsky: *Blaise Cendrars Temoin de la Grande Guerre: La Guerre du Poet Devenu Prosateur*, in *Feuilles de routes*, Classique Garnier, no. 54, Paris, 2016, p. 66

<sup>20</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*, Vintage Books by Random House, New York, 2011, p.47



they are sentient beings, not simply masses of faceless humanity.”<sup>21</sup> The power of this memoir, as well as the most undeniable proof of its accuracy, is indeed a certain resistance to create a universal story about the war and the insistence on the personal detail; the stories of his fellow soldiers come to define his own sense of self, just as their shared views on the war become mixed with his own: “I didn’t want to generalise. I’m only talking about what I have seen and the horizon of the soldier is limited and does not surpass the limit of his squad, his section, his company.”<sup>22</sup> If the universe of the combatant is little, then all the more powerful are the influences of that universe on his sense of self.

#### 1.4. *Je Becomes Nous*

So, if Cendrars is exposing the stories of his comrades, it is also because through them he can make better sense of his own war experience. Sometimes, the mingling of the squad’s memories is noticeable in certain episodes of the memoir as well, when a character’s side of the story would complete the author’s lacking information. For example, Garnéro’s supposed death is told from two perspectives: one time, as Cendrars remembers it and another time, as Cendrars hears it from Garnéro himself, ten years after the war, when the two meet randomly on the streets of Paris and start reminiscing about their days as soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

Another interesting example for the way the collective memory of the squad and the remembered events of its combatants mix together are the battles from d’Artois, in the spring of 1915, which play an important part in Cendrars’ memoir, being mentioned already in the second chapter of *The Bloody Hand*. However, according to the research of Laurent Tatu and Julien Bogousslavsky, the French writer couldn’t have participated in these legendary battles, as his regiment was stationed near the Somme at the time.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, they play an important role for the regiment that

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<sup>21</sup> Paula S. Fass, *The Memoir Problem*, in *Reviews in American History*, Volume 34, Number 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2006, p.111

<sup>22</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 156 (my own translation)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-131 (my own translation)

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Tatu and Julien Bogousslavsky: *Blaise Cendrars Temoin de la Grande Guerre: La Guerre du Poet Devenu Prosateur*, op.cit., p. 66

he would join later on, in July 1915, as well as for some of his soldier friends, who did actually fight at d'Artois. Therefore, by repeatedly hearing about the legendary battles, he comes to integrate those memories into his own, remembering something that he has never actually experienced. This mingling of sensations and memories is also conveyed in the use of the plural pronoun "nous" (we) rather than the individual "je" (I) in some instances of the narrative, especially during a battle, when the experience becomes one shared by everyone involved:

"We were at the end of the line. It was happening. Our legs were as if cut off. Out of breath. Our hearts were beating in our throats. The hands were shaking. A flood of sweat ran down our spines. [...] We therefore squeezed in the furrows, happy and dismayed, huddled against each other."<sup>25</sup>

By using people as his main pretext to write about the war experience, Cendrars manages to deliver a very personal image of the Great War - not as it was experienced back then, but as it remains in the mind of one particular combatant, thirty years after the conflict.

### 1.5. When Remembering Takes Time

In the eyes of the writer, the immediacy of writing does not necessarily assure the accuracy of the account: often the witness can be too focused on one aspect, too shocked to process the events and the story would result in random impressions that would be more descriptive of the sensation itself than on the overall image:

"If I would have written *The Bloody Hand* immediately after the war, it would have been a different book, more made-up, photographed, instant, but not more veridical because of that. Synthesising needs a certain distance. Forgetting too. And forgiveness!"<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, this distance between the writing and the written lifts off some of the accuracy claims that would weigh immediate war memoirs down. Readers of the twenties were more concerned with the practical details of the war they had just lived through, seeking to find in a combatant's memoir a purpose for the war, as well as a way of remembering it through facts: the figures, the battles, the strategies. But the readers of *The Bloody Hand*, who had just been through two world

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<sup>25</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., pp. 174-175 (my own translation)

<sup>26</sup> Blaise Cendrars in *Blaise Cendrars vous parle...*, by Michel Manoll (Ed.), Denoël, Paris, 1952, p. 154

wars in the span of fifty years, were perhaps less focused on the accuracy of every single detail and more interested in the act of creation as such, perhaps as a way of rebuilding a world from which only ruins remained, through the eyes of those who experienced it first-hand: once history fails to give any reassurance or meaning to all that suffering, it leaves place for the art to pick up the shambles and reconstruct the past in a way that anyone could find some kind of consolation in it.

For Cendrars, who is able to contextualise his story and analyse the war with a lucidity that only the passage of time can provide, the most noticeable trait of the Great War seems to be its chaotic character - the complete lack of any capable organisational force is what stands out in most of the battle scenes, when the word *hasard* (hazard) and *pagaie* (disorder) are repeated time and time again: “I hurry to say that war is not beautiful [...]. Of all the battles that I have witnessed, I have brought back only one image, that of disorder. I wonder what the people are going to look for, when they say that they have lived historical or sublime hours.”<sup>27</sup> Military institutions, armies, and strategies - they all obey only one single force: the force of chaos. This is a common method for war memoirist to signal the individuality of the soldier, who is no longer part of the military machine, as it used to be in the past, but rather stands alone, opposing any political leadership.<sup>28</sup> Alone in the crowd, the soldier of the Great War turns towards his inner self, shifting his focus on the personal experience and the purpose it could have for him, making the experience not just a collective one, but also a very personal one. However, amid all the fire and the fighting, the soldier barely has time to process any of it: “We don't have the time to judge or to form an opinion. Time is pressing. [...] The fortune of the arms is a matter of hazard.”<sup>29</sup> The challenge becomes then, through art and writing, to regain a sort of control over the chaotic universe of the battlefield, “impose verbal order”<sup>30</sup> and avoid the overwhelming feeling of meaninglessness that such an experience might bring once the war is over. One way of doing this is demystifying a war that had been one of the main topics of discussions, as well as the source of inspiration for artists and writers for decades: “The purpose [...] of telling the war ‘as it is’ and not as it is

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<sup>27</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 93 (my own translation)

<sup>28</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Renaissance Military Memoirs: War, History and Identity, 1450-1600 (Warfare in History)*, op.cit., p. 46

<sup>29</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., pp. 93-94 (my own translation)

<sup>30</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *War and Words* in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* by Kate McLoughlin (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 19

supposed to be, may come from the desire to demystify a phenomenon that centuries of histories had glorified.”<sup>31</sup>

Cendrars tries to remain closer to the truth by revealing some of the less heroic moments from the battlefield. For instance, the writer admits that, most of the time, the soldiers were confused about their role and had no idea towards where they were being led: “But what pissed us off was not knowing where we were or what we were doing there, and also that real smell of shit we were plunging into and which was surrounding us.”<sup>32</sup> This chaos escalates to even higher proportions in a battle scene, in which the squad of Cendrars is being shot by French troops, unaware that they are shooting at their own people: “They started shooting at us from behind. Not the Germans. The French! Volley fires. The friends. Our people.”<sup>33</sup> The absurdity of the scene is also highlighted by the fractured language, paralleling the thoughts of the writer, shocked by the scene and by the inefficiency of military leadership. Powerless in the face of such a brutal reality, the writer seems to resort to his own imagination in order to tell a truth that can’t be revealed through a simple confession: “With all his natural tendency towards hyperbole, Cendrar's war stories are probably the most moving and true-to-life texts ever written on the reigning spirit of the trenches during World War I.”<sup>34</sup> Through his lenses, the reader experiences the complexity of war and the different kind of memories it leaves the soldier with. Interestingly enough, Blaise Cendrars never really ceases to believe in the cause, never forgets how high the stakes are, even in spite of the devastations and the unnecessary brutality of the war; he hates the way war must be fought, as well as being on the battlefield, but continues to fight until the end for his adoptive country - an attitude to which most soldiers of the Great War would eventually confess to.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, another attitude to which veterans could relate and which can be found in the memoirs of Cendrars is the special, intimate bond which forms between members of the same squad, the nostalgic memories of the companionship born in the depth of the trenches, which no one, except for those present there, can relate to.

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Savage Brosman, *The Functions of War Literature* in *South Central Review*, vol. 9, No.1: *Historicizing Literary Contexts*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, p. 89

<sup>32</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., pp. 86-87 (my own translation)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 88

<sup>34</sup> Monique Chefedor, *Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., p.115

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Blaise Cendrars et “La Main Coupée”* in *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, Presses Universitaires de France, No. 175, Paris, 1994, p. 28

These episodes are rare, yet endearing nonetheless: “I couldn’t speak.” Cendrars writes, as he is describing the Christmas Eve of 1914, “A smile was playing on my lips. It was nerving. But, deep down, I was happy. I shook Sawo’s hand. Deep down, all four of us were laughing.”<sup>36</sup> For, if at times war seems to lead to a loss of individuality, it also destroys all barriers of social classes and allows for bonds to form outside of the customarily class lines: “Central for the positive experience of the war was the sense of comradeship, or solidarity, which is a central feature of many of the memoirs and of the public reception of them.”<sup>37</sup> This results into yet another paradox: even after all the horrors, the writer still finds pleasant memories between all the painful ones.

### 1.6. (Re)Creating the Battlefield

If Cendrars never loses sight of the reason for fighting, he does lose hope both in civilisation and in God, who appears to have turned a blind eye, leaving the soldiers to their own miserable destinies. Embarrassed by the horrors around him, aware of the war that would follow and losing all hope, Cendrars doesn’t hide the odious face of the war that is usually left out of other accounts:

“Angéli had died asphyxiated, his head in German shit, his legs towards the sky. Two thighs widened in the shape of a ‘V’. A detail. Another corpse among the other thousands and dozens of thousands, all more or less grotesque. It’s not possible. I have already said it. God is absent from the battlefields. He stays out of it. He is hiding. It’s an embarrassment.”<sup>38</sup>

Using different language registers, the writer appeals to all the senses of the reader, recreating an eerie atmosphere of fear and chaos, authentic to the reality of the Great War, creating an aesthetic of horror, while also unveiling what is hidden behind the glorified image of the battle. For example, Cendrars’ memoir is full of French army slang, so as to give the reader an impression of what the conversations between the soldiers sounded like: “poilus” is the term most frequently used to talk about ordinary soldiers, while the writer refers to the Germans almost exclusively as “Boches,” a pejorative term used by the French during the First World War. Furthermore, certain accents of the characters are pointed out, a detail that adds to the authenticity of the text; Guidicelli,

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<sup>36</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 175 (my own translation)

<sup>37</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Memories from the Frontline: Memoirs and Meanings of The Great War from Britain, France and Germany*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, p. 308

<sup>38</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 335 (my own translation)

for instance, a Corsican soldier, is described as having a particular accent, rolling his “r.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, the reader not only ‘sees’ some words on the pages of a book, but can actually play the voice of the character in his mind. The conversations between the soldiers of his squad are re-imagined as dialogue, almost as if nothing is omitted - not the inside jokes of the soldiers, nor the indecent comments: “Through his consummate balancing of all shades of humour (broad, wry, tender, malicious, bitter, salacious) and Gothic horror, he probably achieved the most candid iconoclastic portrayal of the colossal absurdity that war really is.”<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, in his attempt to regain the atmosphere of the battlefield, Cendrars often resorts to descriptions of smells, wrapping the reader up into a world of senses, where everything suggests *war* and misery: the odour of “chemistry and decomposing bodies”<sup>41</sup> is what persists most ardently in the mind of the French writer and just the mention of it is enough to suggest to the reader the apocalyptic universe of the war. In addition to this, Cendrars’ language is also heavily influenced by his poetical sensibilities, which means that, at times, very familiar language can be found right next to powerful metaphors or stylistic devices, which turn the experience of war into a work of art. The French writer uses many repetitions and metaphors, like the phrase “God is absent,”<sup>42</sup> a motif that echoes throughout the narrative. Moreover, if one considers the memoir a literary genre that is supposed to be as close to reality as possible, the writer’s preference for the absurd and the symbolic is all the more noticeable: “It is a complex montage, where the real and fictive paths of the labyrinth, as well as the chronological modifications, attain their paroxysm.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, the small anecdotes of his squad can be understood as standing in for the reality of the Great War, as experienced by the individual.

The central symbol of the war memoir is, nevertheless, the hand that the writer loses in 1915 at Navarin, which also serves as title for the book and is depicted on the cover of the French edition from Folio, along with his regimental number that would come to define his identity as a

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<sup>39</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 79 (my own translation)

<sup>40</sup> Monique Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., p.116

<sup>41</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 81 (my own translation)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187

<sup>43</sup> Lauren Tatu and Julien Bogousslavsky, *Blaise Cendrars Témoin de la Grande Guerre: La Guerre du Poète Devenu Prosateur*, op.cit., p.73

soldier. The amputation of his arm is surely the event that marks a new time in the life of Cendrars, for whom the loss of his right arm is not only a constant reminder of the brutality of war, but also a tragic loss of the natural instrument of the writer.<sup>44</sup> From that moment on, he must go against his nature and either give up writing or learn to adapt, to create in a new way and use his left arm (which he will learn to do). Although not frequently mentioned throughout the war account, the severed hand does get its own short chapter towards the end of the memoir, a chapter in which reality becomes entangled in the fictional, creating a strange, surreal scene, its title, “The Red Lily,” being also a nod to the work of Anatole France, in which the imaginary and the real come together.<sup>45</sup> This then means that the anonymous hand, found by Faval in the grass, is a metaphor: “It reveals that the war also creates surrealistic works of art, it composes its own aesthetic.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, Cendrars describes the kind of art that can result after the war: a disturbing image, a collage in which beauty and torture stand side by side in a shocking way, that is meant to leave the reader with a frown and a strange mix of awe and disgust. Only in this way is the writer able to portray war: by distancing himself from it and turning it into something abstract, “perceived through the camera eye of his mind and heart.”<sup>47</sup>

### **1.7. Literature Becomes an Old Soldier’s Therapy**

Finishing his writings nearly thirty years after having fought in the Great War, it is no wonder that his memories are influenced by all the events happening in between; Cendrars writes not only with the image of the Great War in his mind, but also with that of the Second World War. The bitterness is therefore doubled, as he is aware that The First World War and all the misery that it meant would not bring any of the positive changes that people had expected of it, on the contrary: it would only start a violent flame that would eventually lead to disaster. The constant mention of the failure of civilisation is then not only alluding to the grotesque deaths witnessed on the battlefields in 1914 or 1915, but echoes all the devastation of the Second World War, as well as the horrors of the concentration camps. For the same reason, *The Bloody Hand* can't

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<sup>44</sup> Claire Maingon, *Main coupée, main errante, main absente: Allégorie réelle de la Grande Guerre* in *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.4000/abpo.3401>, p. 58, (acc. 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2020)

<sup>45</sup> Claire Maingon, *Main coupée, main errante, main absente: Allégorie réelle de la Grande Guerre*, op.cit., p. 62

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 64

<sup>47</sup> Monique Chefedor, *Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., p.114

be a memoir which tries to find a sense for the Great War, for any purpose which others might have found before him becomes irrelevant in the face of the following conflict, which the writer was living through while writing this memoir. Instead, it turns into an aesthetic, which will influence his other works as well: “The unspeakable reality of war may very well be one of the decisive factors which led Cendrars to take refuge in the inner realm of fantasy and create the mythic version of the world that constitutes many of his stories.”<sup>48</sup> As the writer is telling the story of his war experience, one can observe his own wonder at the memories that pour out of his mind: “If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic.”<sup>49</sup>

At the end of the narrative, the writer contemplates once again the destiny of the human being, thrown into the war, as he becomes reduced to the number of his identification number: “Death... Birth... To what good!...”<sup>50</sup>. The memoir ends as he is chosen at random - as all things happen in Cendrars’ war - to spend his permission, on the 14th of July in Paris.

Beyond the trenches, it seems as if the writer is hopeless when it comes to finding a purpose in the war. However, through literature, which had been his passion before the war, he finds a refuge when the fighting ceases, a healing space where emotions can be articulated, put into order and made sense of, where old friends can be brought back to life and given a voice. In turn, the experience in itself teaches Cendrars how to adapt his literary style to his artistic purpose: as he is struggling to remember and to form those past impressions into a coherent narrative, the poet becomes a memoirist.

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<sup>48</sup> Monique Chefdor, *Blaise Cendrars*, op.cit., p.118

<sup>49</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory in Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser (Ed.), Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1998, p. 111

<sup>50</sup> Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée*, op.cit., p. 432 (my own translation)



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