

THE BECKONING VOID IN MORAVAGINE

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To anyone who has tried to analyze it, Blaise Cendrars's *Moravagine* (1926) is an almost perversely complex novel. What most dramatically illustrates this complexity, as it reveals the man and clarifies the novel, is the fact that its center is conspicuously occupied by a hole. It is a very interesting hole, because it is simultaneously a narrative gap, a philosophical void, an anatomical orifice, and a *lapsus memoriae*.

This unfilled space occurs in the chapter entitled «Mascha,» which is both the physical and the psychological center of the novel. The setting is Russia in full revolutionary upheaval. A group of conspirators, including Moravagine and the narrator, Raymond La Science, is preparing to overthrow the government and assassinate the czar and his family. As a kind of obscene centerfold for his novel, Cendrars introduces a new character, Mascha, whom he describes as an obese Lithuanian Jewess, «a cold, cruel woman, never short of ideas, capable of satanic invention and perversion.»⁽¹⁾ Mascha is at first the mastermind of the group's terrorist activities, for she possesses the peculiar ability to sense what course of action to take and the precise mechanistic qualities to execute the most cold-blooded plans. But she also has a fatal flaw--an exaggerated sentimentality--and this soon undermines her authority in the group, as it causes her to fall in love with Moravagine. This psychological fissure in Mascha's façade of precision and intuitiveness is symbolized by the physical opening in her abdomen, her vagina, for through it Moravagine exploits her weakness and brings about her downfall. The «love» affair culminates with Mascha becoming pregnant, but as her stomach expands, her self-possession and her power as a revolutionary leader decline. She becomes at first unreliable, then disoriented and paranoid, until finally the terrorists are forced to send her away to have her baby. In her final, postmortem appearance in the novel, we see Mascha's grotesque body hanging from the

ceiling of a railroad boxcar, a grimacing fetus dangling between her legs.

The conception and abortion of Mascha's child represents a kind of biological parallel to the conception and abortion of the revolutionary ideal among the group of terrorists she had once led. They too progress from a state of expectant fullness toward a void of deception and betrayal. They are at first committed to a brand of nihilism loosely associated with the Russian anarchists Kropotkin and Bakunin, which calls for an idealistic and somewhat crude revolt against the established social order. But as circumstances force them to evolve from philosophical opposition to open revolt to underground terrorist tactics, physical exhaustion and moral apathy transform the last desperate members of the dwindling group into cold, efficient realists. They become technicians who can scarcely taste the death in their mouths. Their excesses force them to live in virtual isolation from the Russian people, from the moderate political leaders, and even from most of their former allies:

We were abandoned by everyone and each one of us lived all alone, in a rarified atmosphere, hunched over himself as if over a void. . . .

.....
Each of us sought rather to collect his most secret strengths, whose extreme dispersion was hollowing out a void in our depths, and to stabilize his thoughts whose inexhaustible flow was swallowed up in this abyss. (pp. 299-300)

Their sacrifices are not rewarded, and, losing the sense of purpose that had once spurred them on, the actual practice of nihilism becomes for them a particularly virulent variety of spiritual decay. Cendrars develops this inner emptiness into a fullblown metaphor by portraying the group's secret headquarters in Moscow's Polytechnical Institute as the interior of a hollow caryatid:

We lived in little rooms built into the pediment of the building whose stone figures were hollow and could easily hide us. One of the large columns of the peristyle had been hollowed out. . . . (p. 300)

It is at this impasse that the members of the revolutionary team begin to feel Moravagine's mysterious, compelling influence. In this chapter he is a self-effacing manipulator of the others, a *deus ex machina in absentia*: «Basically, it was he who had always made us act and, if Ropschine was the boss, it was Moravagine who was the master, the master of us all» (p. 310). He encourages them to drink the brandy someone had managed to filch, and this in turn causes a great deal of laughter at the hopelessness of their situation. Gradually, but only temporarily, he fills the emptiness of their vacant spirits. Through the narrator, Cendrars uses a curious word to characterize his hero at this point in the story; he calls him an «empan,» which means space or span, and usually designates the space between outstretched thumb and little finger:

This little span which serves as a springboard for a little idea, hard and round as a billiard ball, and which later becomes the hand which works with precision . . . and the same hand holding the orb of the Empire in its palm, weighing it, ready to throw it like a bomb, ready to make it explode.(p. 310)

The narrator also observes that Moravagine's strange presence in the group intimates an odd double existence, as though he were both there and not there, in the past and in the present: «He was there, seated among us, yet alone, absent, unknown» (p. 310).

These reflections point to an essential characteristic of Moravagine throughout the novel and in this chapter especially. He is able to divest himself of all rational and emotional dimensions almost at will; he can alternate between psychic emptiness and a commanding physical presence that influences the people and events around him. From one point of view, Moravagine's «absence» implies that he too is hollow, like his fellow conspirators. When pressed too hard, when scrutinized too closely, he yields, revealing only an enigmatic laugh which deflects further pressure. But on the other hand the text indicates that he is as solid as the «hand» which holds the anarchist's bomb. Cendrars hence incorporates two antithetical properties into one image describing his hero: an empty space which has physical solidity. It is an image of elasticity further strengthened by the use of another metaphor, «springboard,» which suggests vibration and rhythm. The idea of yielding to pressure and then bouncing back is implicit

in this image of Moravagine as «span»-«hand,» since the empty space becomes in some sense or in some instances solid through a «springboard»-like process of pulsating energy. The vibrations produced by this process, recalling the «original rhythm» that Moravagine so passionately seeks, represent an intermediary stage between nothingness, absence, or hollowness, and the solidity necessary for physical existence. By being simultaneously «there» and «not there,» a void and a solid, in the past and in the present, Moravagine encompasses the polarity of opposites and synthesizes the antithetical. In short, he has found in revolutionary action a movement which reproduces the primordial rhythm of the cosmos, and, aligning himself with it, he participates in the rhythmic execution of the First Principle, creation-destruction.

The second half of the chapter «Mascha» revolves around a date in history, June 11, 1907. This is the date the conspirators have set for the assassination of the czar and the royal family, and also the day when Mascha expects to have her baby. Cendrars uses a new narrative technique in this section; instead of the broad panoramic view of events that preceded, we now see things only from the narrow perspective of Raymond La Science's journal entries. By reducing the scope of the story, Cendrars can focus more effectively on a single consciousness, and can thereby create an atmosphere of tension by coupling the gradual unfolding of clock time with the narrator's mounting anxieties. It is in this portion of the narrative that the thematics of the hole, and its strategist Moravagine, plays a most suggestive and nearly subliminal part.

The overall plan of the conspiracy calls for a precise coordination among the far-flung members of the group. Raymond La Science's assignment is to blow up the Polytechnical Institute by remote control, thereby giving the signal to set the whole revolt in motion. His description of the minute care he must take in assembling and hooking up the explosive mechanism rivets our attention on a second-by-second elaboration of a new psychological reality:

No more than three minutes.

The second hand is turning less rapidly than my impatience and the tenths hand is going crazy.

I am counting out loud.

I am all sweaty.

Oh, if only Moravagine were here. I call out to him:
«Mora! Mora!»

Silence.

Where am I?

Is all this real?

I am watching myself act.

Yet, I am the one who is acting. I am holding this wire in my right hand. This other in my left hand. One end is all twisted. The other forms a small loop. I have only to put the twisted end into the loop and fold it back into a hook shape, then wrap it all up in tape with my small pliers and . . .

And . . . (p. 316)

Raymond La Science is so intent on the precise requirements of his mission that he begins to lose all sense of self and «real» time. He lapses into a speculation on the possibility of a man-made holocaust which would destroy the earth, but soon returns to his former concentration:

Seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten.

I tied the two wires together.

What surgical dexterity in the use of the pliers!

What a disappointment!

Nothing happens.

I was expecting a terrible explosion.

I listen, breathless.

Nothing.

And I thought I was going to blow up the world!

Nothing. (pp. 317-318)

As the chronometric details wind down their conclusion, time seems to decrease its momentum, and the minutes and seconds intrude obsessively into the narrator's perception and description of events. But the precision in which he and his comrades had put so much faith and effort seemingly comes to naught, «nothing,» resulting in an anticlimactical «what a disappointment!» However, upon leaving the hotel where he had performed his mission, Raymond La Science discovers that he actually had succeeded in destroying the Polytechnical Institute after all. Since his hotel was in a different part of the city, he only learns of his success

through an account in the evening newspaper. He boards a train and hurries to a secret rendezvous in the country, taking great care frequently to inform himself, and the reader, of the precise time.

Raymond La Science was to have performed his mission at exactly 5:00 P. M. on Wednesday, June 9, 1907. At 5:17 he leaves the hotel and at 12:11 he is on the train to Twer where, after a fifteen-minute walk, he is transported to a farmer's cottage, arriving at about 1:30 A. M. He then notes that his watch has stopped, and launches into a long speculation on the possible consequences of his comrades' missions. This is followed by more or less incoherent ramblings, hysterical outbursts, voiced fears and suspicions, and a dissertation on nihilist philosophy which ends with, «. . . and the universe is only, at best, the digestion of God» (p. 323). Neither he nor the reader has any reason to suspect that he has lost consciousness or that time has somehow elapsed unnoticed, because the narration has proceeded uninterruptedly from the hotel scene to the end of Raymond La Science's outbursts.

At this point, however, Moravagine arrives at the cottage where Raymond La Science is hiding. As is characteristic of his presence throughout the novel, his re-entry into the mainstream of the story causes an undercurrent of doubt and uncertainty about the nature of reality to become overt. He informs Raymond La Science that it is not the early morning of Thursday, June 10, as the narrator had believed, but rather that it is the early morning of Friday, June 11--a day later, the day agreed upon for the assassination of the czar. Mystified and frantic at this inexplicable turn of events, Raymond La Science begins to wonder if his mind has reached its breaking point:

If Moravagine is telling the truth, if, really, today is the 11th as he says and not the 10th as I believe, then . . . then I am more gravely afflicted than I thought. I know I am ill since I feel my fatigue to the marrow. But still, to have slept twenty-four hours without realizing it, without knowing it, that's serious. A clinical case. The sleep of the deranged. Nervous prostration. Hole. Epileptic abyss. Shock. Syndrome. (pp. 326-327)

the knowledge that Moravagine's information about the day of the week had been correct. Further, he discovers that the efforts of the conspirators have been betrayed, the revolt aborted, and most of his comrades jailed or executed. Both he and the reader are perplexed as to the reasons for the failure of the conspiracy: «Myself, I no longer know exactly how all that happened. It's no use making the effort, my memory has gaps. I can't link the facts together or understand how they could have proceeded each from another» (p. 311).

Raymond La Science's mental lapses demonstrate his inability to observe objective reality correctly, but they do not signify a complete cessation of mental activity. Thus, as Moravagine leads him on a series of maneuvers to escape the post-insurrection reprisals, the revolutionary adventure becomes a terrifying hallucination in the narrator's mind:

Above, below, images of life hovered and spun around, right side out, upside down, inside out, before turning to dust: the Kremlin walls, Saint-Basile, the Bridge of the Marshals, the walls of Chinatown, the inside of my hotel room, then, with some delay, Raja, evaporated and tenuous. She becomes frayed. Her legs do the splits, stretch, dematerialize. Now nothing remains but a silk stocking suspended in the atmosphere, a stocking which swells at her calf, becomes big like a sack, like a belly, enormous, enormous. It's Mascha. She disappears in turn, and a fat scurfy baby falls to the ground, his head nodding and bobbing. (p. 334)

It is apparent that the narrator, who was originally supposed to be an objective, rational scientist, has gradually succumbed to the very madness he claimed to be observing in Moravagine: mania, delusions, psychosis. We can see that he moves from the certainty of precise, mechanistic clock time, mirrored in his pre-occupation with his watch, to the imagined void or non-time of «nothing» and «what a disappointment!» He then declines to the point where significant gaps in his memory suggest that he may have difficulty differentiating between reality and unreality. This inexplicable and untraceable memory loss seems to push him over some indefinable psychic limit, for he ends by descending completely into the world of hallucination. Thus the pivotal step in his journey from the reality of external events to the unreality

of hallucination is the «gap» («lacune») in his memory and consequently in the narrative itself. It is a step which is logically comprehensible, at least to us as readers, since it is conceivable that under certain conditions of great emotional and physical stress a person could unconsciously lapse into sleep for a twenty-four hour period.

But the essential point of this incident is that Raymond La Science's «loss» of a day is also ours. We both lose the thread of logical sequence or continuity that holds reality together. For the narrator it is a gap in the temporal continuity of his life, while for us it is almost a spatial phenomenon, an unfilled space in our perception and comprehension of the fictional world before our eyes. As in the other hallucination scenes in the novel, there is a missing element, a «hole» or «abyss» or «fissure» through which the reality of time and events has escaped. Cendrars projects the non-events of Raymond La Science's *lapsus memoriae* into our awareness in the form of unresolved mystification, as if he were forcing us ask the question: why is this momentary forgetfulness necessary? One could object that it does not aid the development of the plot; in fact, it even obscures the actions and motivations of some of the main characters. These objections might be valid if we were concerned only with following the surface contour of the novel, the single dimension of its linear, cause-and-effect development. However, Cendrars operates in several dimensions simultaneously, and he actively seeks to probe the deepest recesses of his reader's consciousness. This «hole» in the narrative, continuing and expanding the «fissure»-hollowness thematics, may hence be seen as Cendrars's way of conveying to the reader, or even of creating within his mind, the feeling of mental disorder.

In his last long monologue, prior to his entry into World War I as an aviator, Moravagine intones a kind of apology of disorder, chiding the narrator for his interest in maintaining a static, orderly life:

«I understand your need for rest and your desire to bury yourself in your books. Damn, you still want to reflect, you have always needed to reflect on lots of things, to look and to see, to take measurements, imprints, notes that you don't know how to classify. Leave that to the police archivists. You haven't understood yet that the world of thought is done for and that philosophy is worse than the Bertillon system.

You make me laugh with your metaphysical anguish, it's fear that grips you, fear of life, fear of men of action, fear of action itself and of disorder. But everything is disorder, my friend. Vegetables, minerals, and animals are disorder; the multitude of human races is disorder; men's lives, thought, history, battles, inventions, commerce, and the arts are disorder; theories, passions, and systems are disorder. It's always been like that. Why do you want to put order in all that? What order? What are you looking for? There is no truth. There is only action, action which obeys a million different motives, ephemeral action, action which is subject to all possible and imaginable contingencies, antagonistic action. Life, Life is crime, theft, jealousy, hunger, falsehood, fornication, stupidity, sickness, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, heaps of cadavers. You can't do anything about it, my poor fellow, you're not going to start farting books again, huh? . . . » (p. 392-393)

This passage, although it occurs at a later point in the novel, sheds a good deal of light on the transition of the narrative from reality to unreality through «holes.» Moravagine's tone here is serious and even a little didactic, suggesting that he may be a vehicle for some of Cendrars's own thoughts and feelings. Both author and character view human existence as a series of necessarily active responses to the world around them. In the novel Moravagine acts out his life by obeying the «million different motives» of phylogenetic, ontogenetic, atavistic, instinctual, and cosmic influences. His «ephemeral action» has subtly and mysteriously affected the actions of others and the course of events. His «antagonistic action» has pitted him against the weary, fear-ridden abstractions that the human race imposes upon itself in the name of truth and order. Moravagine is in fact the very embodiment of the principle of disorder in human affairs. As such, his presence in the chaotic upheavals of the Russian revolution seems almost foreordained. It is as if he were the spirit of the revolution itself, or at least the essential spark or catalyst that activates such large-scale anarchy and wholesale disruption.

The uncertainty of both the narrator and the reader regarding the origin of the group's betrayal and the circumstances surrounding the «lost» day revolves around Cendrars's fundamental belief, reflected in Moravagine's monologue, that «There is only

action.» Cendrars can and does give descriptions of mental disorder which approximate the actual state of insanity:

Fever, thirst, fatigue, drunkenness, insomnia, nightmare, sleep, laughter, despair, not giving a damn, anger, hunger, fever, thirst, fatigue, all this hangs on the ends of our nerves like overpowering weights and the whole frail clockwork of our human machine is broken down, the muscles grate, folly sounds the hour, you are no longer master of your tongue, you stumble over your thoughts. (pp. 334-335)

But such descriptions, no matter how accurate or evocative, are essentially passive techniques that objectify mental disorder. Raymond La Science's verbalization of his inner turmoil can only imply further conscious reasoning, a «normal» retrospection into the «abnormal.»

To avoid this facile passivity, Cendrars eradicates all premises of consciousness in Raymond La Science, thereby eliminating the need for words or even for the narrator himself. In its place he substitutes a «hole» in the continuum of the fictional reality he has created. Akin to the «fissure» that Moravagine described at the bottom of the conical hallucination he experienced while in prison, it is a mysterious, beckoning void that stimulates the reader's unconscious mental processes. Unreality then subtly usurps reality, as the unconscious mind unexpectedly gains ascendancy over the normally dominant rational faculties through a sudden hiatus in consciousness. Moravagine is the perpetrator of this mutiny of the unconscious; he brings about the displacements or reversals of habitual modes of perception in both the narrator and the reader. By applying the idea of «antagonistic action» to the process of creating a fictional hero, Cendrars is thus able to substitute forgetfulness for memory, mystery for precision, disorder for order, unreality for reality.

Cendrars's fascination with the void takes several forms in this long and carefully developed chapter. Most apparent is the connection between the book's title and the feminine orifice to which it obviously alludes. Mascha's anatomical opening and its psychological parallel--her sentimentality--allow the introduction of biological concerns into a process that should have remained spiritual if it was to succeed. Revolutionaries need high ideals, but Mascha regresses downward on the evolutionary spiral, toward a

greater and denser cellularity. In her, biological cause and effect follow upon each other with terrifying mathematical certainty, and the paradox of her existence grows more and more pronounced. As she prepares to produce life, she comes closer to death; injection becomes expulsion; fullness becomes hollowness. «Mort au vagin» («death to the vagina») is therefore not only a cry of revolt against the absurdity of life; it is also the despairing recognition («mort *dans* le vagin,» «death *in* the vagina») that being born into physical existence constitutes an abortion of the spirit, a negation of the promise of and potential for perfection, unity, or some other form of absolute which is constantly denied.

Also in this chapter, we see that Cendrars attempts to mystify his reader through what might be termed the technique of insufficiency. He does not provide full and accurate information regarding his characters' motivations, the extent of their activities, or the details connecting one event to another. Yet he does describe the apparent results of these phenomena, leaving the reader to speculate on the enigmatic gaps in the narrative. This of course is not a new technique. In a slightly different context, Jay Bochner has pointed out that it is one of the elements of «elasticity» in Cendrars's poetry, and that it is a staple of modern *poesis*.⁽²⁾ Jean-Carlo Flückiger, in his essay on the structural organization of *Moravagine*, relates the gaps in the Cendrarsian text to the «jeu du centre vide» or central void which serves as the generative mechanism at the core of the spiralling movement of Cendrars's writing.⁽³⁾ We might also note that the «lacunes» in the narrative are comparable to the idea of the «creux» or hollow in Robbe-Grillet; both authors operate on a principle of selected omissions to reproduce the structure of the mind in the structure of the novel. The consciousness of the reader, having entered the story through a gap in its sequential logic and being confronted with various unresolvable dilemmas, is forced toward the same disorder or distortion that produced the gap in the first place.

We can group under the technique of insufficiency the symbolism of the caryatids, the «fissure» motif, the images of the conspirators' psychological voids and of Mascha's post-abortion «ventre,» and, more generally, the theme of hollowness. It is this hollow condition that *Moravagine* reacts against, capitalizes on, or seeks to rectify. Filling the void by penetration and injection, often through some sort of «fissure,» is one of *Moravagine's* prime functions to ensure the continuation of the revolutionary

adventure. But hollowness itself, being a characteristic of his own personality, is also a state to which he adapts himself in the larger context of the narrative. As an «empan,» a blank space in the chaotic tapestry of revolution, he lures the other characters and the reader into the events by mysteriously disappearing, even though he is still «there» and seems to be guiding the events in some subtle way. These rhythmic sequences of emptiness and fullness create an atmosphere of continuous discontinuity in the novel, but they also possess a hypnotic quality that enables the reader to pass over them by a kind of mental levitation. We accept the technique of insufficiency not in spite of its incompleteness but because of it, because it becomes a part of us as we fill its voids in our own imagination.

Although *Moravagine* is Cendrars's «blackest» novel and the one in which he explores most deeply the idea of emptiness and absence, it is far from the only work in his opus where the void can be detected. One particularly memorable example of it occurs at the end of his short story «L'Egoutier de Londres» in *Histoires vraies*, where he describes the prison Sidi-bel-Abbès, built by Legionnaires from a single gigantic block of concrete: «They supposedly built a fissure into its thickness, a narrow passageway which, from the death cell, led mysteriously to freedom.»(4) Only the most desperate of men, those condemned to die, can find the secret passage that releases them from imprisonment in this dense mass. The contrast between the solid, overpowering concrete and the void that paradoxically negates its purpose demonstrates both the author's compassionate nature and his love for the mystery and eccentricity of life. And who can fail to be struck by Cendrars's remarkable intuition in *Le Lotissement du ciel* when he ponders what astrophysicists are now calling a «black hole» in the outer reaches of space:

But I contemplated this abyss, a funnel, a black mouth from which escapes, according to popular belief . . . the wind that creates the tornadoes and typhoons and which lifts, uproots the virgin forests and lays them waste periodically and overturns them like a tidal wave, the clouds furiously dumping great waterspouts; this mouth is not a celestial body but a hole at the zenith of the sky, a funnel, an upside-down pyramid, the orifice on an inverted well, the projection of a black cone, it is the abyss that the people in Brazil call the

«coal sack,» in other words: the entrance to Hell, the lair of the World Eater.(5)

Much of *Le Lotissement du ciel* revolves around the «coal sack,» this abyss beyond the sky; it is the constantly recurring theme, and it eventually becomes «the black room of the imagination» out of which pours the torrent of Cendrars's prose. This magnificent and powerful primitive image draws into its depths all who contemplate it, for like the «black hole» postulated by modern astronomers it both absorbs and spits out, seduces and terrifies, annihilates and creates.

Thus the writer who has nothing where his right arm was creates a teeming universe from the original nothingness. The absent appendage is transformed into a constellation that writes in the absolute blackness of space, funneling its primeval beings and forces into our fragmented consciousness.

NOTES

1. Blaise Cendrars, *Moravagine*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, II (1926; rpt. Paris: Denoël, 1961), p. 290. The quotations from *Moravagine* are all my own translations and will hereafter be indicated in the text by page numbers in parentheses.

2. «This abridgment of explanation and transition is the mainstay of modern poetic technique, the manner in which pure picture, or Imagism, becomes meaningful. From acutely perceived but naturally fragmented reality we infer relationships which draw relevant patterns» Jay Bochner, *Blaise Cendrars: Discovery and Recreation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 127-128.

3. Jean-Carlo Flückiger, *Au coeur du texte: Essai sur Blaise Cendrars* (Neuchâtel: A La Baconnière, 1977), p. 208.

4. Blaise Cendrars, *Histoires vraies*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, III (1937; rpt. Paris: Denoël, 1960), p. 373. My translation.

5. Blaise Cendrars, *Le Lotissement du ciel*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, VI (1949; rpt. Paris: Denoël, 1961), p. 498. My translation.