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‘Le plus gros danger pour un écrivain c’est d’être victime de sa légende, de se prendre à son propre piège.’ (Cendrars, 2006: 58-9)

A Textless Title: The Mythical Status of Blaise Cendrars’s *La Légende de Novgorode*

In September 1995, to the great surprise of French-speaking literary circles, Blaise Cendrars’s first poem, *La Légende de Novgorode*, was discovered in Russian translation by the Bulgarian poet and translator, Kiril Kadiiski. This poem had acquired a mythical status in Cendrars’s literary production on account of its systematic appearance in many works and bibliographical lists by the author. Cendrars’s constant questioning of the relationship between the literary and the real throughout his œuvre had made the actual existence of this work seem unlikely. Its discovery therefore received much attention and the authenticity of this text still courts controversy today. *La Légende de Novgorode* could be interpreted as containing the seeds of Cendrars’s resolutely modern poetics with its references to Arthur Rimbaud and a later poem by Cendrars, the *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*. In this article, however, I would like to argue that the reality of the text in material terms is not of utmost importance. Instead, if this missing text is analysed in terms of its imaginary dimension, its ambiguous status can teach us much about Cendrars’s conception of art and writing, aesthetic processes and the relationship between the poet and his work more generally.

Throughout his literary career, from *Séquences* (1913) to *Film sans images* (1959), Cendrars gave *La Légende de Novgorode* a privileged position. No-one had seen

this text, however, until 1995 and the poet himself denied possessing either the manuscript or a copy of it. Always cited at the top of his bibliographical lists, most usually with the specification ‘out of print’ or ‘for restricted sale only’, Cendrars makes reference to this text in many different works in both poetry and prose. But these references are very rarely identical. The title varies (*La Légende de Novgorod(e)* or *La Légende de Novgorod(e), de l’or gris et du silence*) as does the publication date, which ranges from 1903 to 1909. Some works contain direct references, such as his epic simultaneous poem with visual input by Sonia Delaunay, the *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*: ‘Un vieux moine me lisait la légende de Novgorode’; ‘Un vieux moine me chantait la légende de Novgorode’ (Cendrars, 2001: 19-20). In other anthologies of poetry published by Cendrars, such as *Séquences* and *La Guerre au Luxembourg*, brief descriptions of *La Légende de Novgorode* are provided.¹ In *Le Lotissement du ciel*, a novel published in 1949, Cendrars evokes his stay in Russia and this book that no-one had ever seen in the following terms:

‘La Légende de Novgorode, prose traduite en russe par R.R., 14 exemplaires tirés à l’encre blanche sur papier noir, un in-folio de 144 pages sous portefeuille. Typographie Sozonoff, Moscou, 1909, édition dont je ne possède même pas un exemplaire pas plus que je ne possède un double de mon écrit (c’était réminiscence de mes lectures de la geste des Slaves conquérants, l’histoire de la foire de Nijni-Novgorod, une espèce d’épopée cocasse et héroïque.’ (Cendrars, 2005: 279)

In an interview on the radio with Michel Manoll in 1950, Cendrars provides us with yet more allusions in extracts that were not transmitted at the time:

‘J’ai commencé à écrire à Saint-Pétersbourg, imaginez-vous, j’ai écrit d’une façon curieuse. Je me suis réveillé la nuit en sursaut, j’avais fait un drôle de rêve, j’ai écrit une espèce de poème qui décrivait une chasse Renaissance, je ne sais plus après quelle bête, les cavaliers étaient lancés, enfin une espèce de grande tapisserie. C’est une chose qui m’est absolument jaillie de l’inconscient [. . .] *La Légende de Novgorode* a été publiée à mon insu, traduite en russe par un brave homme qui voulait me faire une surprise pour mon anniversaire [. . .]. C’était un livre qui faisait dans les 160 pages [. . .]. C’était plein de bonnes blagues que les marchands russes ont racontées entre eux, auxquelles j’ajoutais mes histoires à moi.’ (Cendrars, 1996: 56)

There also exist indirect allusions to this poem that do not include the title in another novel published in 1945, *L’Homme foudroyé*, and in a literary interview with Hughes Richard.² On account of these varying descriptions and allusions, scholars and readers actually knew very little about this text until 1995: Was it a poem or a novel? Was it written or translated into Russian? Where exactly was it published? Indeed, did this poem really exist? And if it did, why were these descriptions and allusions far from consistent?

Many attributed this first poem to Cendrars’s ‘mythographie’ and his playful penchant for creating and shattering readers’ expectations by mixing haphazardly the real

and the literary. For example, when asked whether he had taken the Transsiberian train during his years in Russia, the breathtaking journey depicted in the first person in the *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*, Cendrars would reply that this was not important; what was important was the fact that his readers had experienced it thanks to him.³ Indeed, his most famous literary stunt is to be found in *Kodak (Documentaire)*, a collection of poems published in 1924, whose original title was not appreciated by the American company of the same name. In these poems he continues his research into plagiarism, intertextuality and rewriting, started in his most modern and innovative collection of poetry, *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*. But he pursues this experimentation leaving no signs for the reader apart from a small, ambiguous clue in an entirely different text, *L'Homme foudroyé*:

‘des années plus tard [. . .] j’eus la cruauté d’apporter à Le Rouge un volume de poèmes et de lui faire constater de visu, en les lui faisant lire, une vingtaine de poèmes originaux que j’avais taillés à coup de ciseaux dans l’un de ses ouvrages en prose et que j’avais publiés sous mon nom! C’était du culot. [. . .]

(Avis aux chercheurs et aux curieux! Pour l’instant je ne puis en dire davantage pour ne pas faire école et à cause de l’éditeur qui serait mortifié d’apprendre d’avoir publié à son insu ma supercherie poétique).’

(Cendrars, 2002: 186)

Fifty years after the publication of *Kodak*, a literary critic, Francis Lacassin, blew Cendrars's cover showing how the poet had in fact made a poetic collage from certain passages of *Le Mystérieux Docteur Cornelius* by Gustave Le Rouge (Lacassin, 1976: 71-93).

Through a poetic process of addition and suppression and using the immediacy of the documentary approach, Cendrars highlights the complex relationship between the literary and the real by plagiarising a text by Le Rouge and pretending not only that it is his, but that the scenery described really exists and that he has seen it. When, in fact, he only ever experienced these landscapes in the work of another who had never seen them either. Attaching great importance to Arthur Schopenhauer's aphorism which states that the world is my own representation and appropriating this idea to his own creative needs (Rousselot, 1958: 197), Cendrars has no qualms about adding to, embellishing or even modifying his literary texts and his own autobiographical references. Indeed, these texts and references are always incomplete because their meaning is not fixed or confined in time or space. It remains open to being reworked and revised from the perspective of the present. The 'reality' of these statements or texts for Cendrars, as author, is not what matters; what matters is how they engage the reader imaginatively.

Cendrars constantly destabilises the reader's viewpoint by clearly undermining any attempt to seek to establish how 'real' his work is or not. To do so would appear to undermine its literary status, for literature has the power to transcend empirical reality. Maurice Blanchot evokes this powerful relationship between what is real in literature and what is not in *Le Livre à venir*:

‘La littérature n’est pas une simple tromperie, elle est le dangereux pouvoir d’aller vers ce qui est, par l’infinie multiplicité de l’imaginaire. La différence entre le réel et l’irréel, l’incalculable privilège du réel, c’est qu’il y a moins de réalité dans la réalité, n’étant que l’irréalité niée, écartée par l’énergique travail de la négation et par cette négation qu’est aussi le travail.’ (Blanchot, 1971: 142-43)

For Blanchot, literature has a privileged status because it takes us toward the unreality of reality. Literature is not just about deception or trickery as this would detract from the power of the literary to disrupt the reality of reality, to create an experience of the real or the illusory quality of reality. In Cendrars’s literary texts, it soon becomes evident that the relationships between the real and the literary, the past and the present, are far from being clearly defined or linear. As the poet states himself:

‘Je n’oublie jamais que le passé est avant tout une chose mouvante, comme aujourd’hui, et que tout ce qui a vécu vit encore, change, permute, bouge, se transforme, et que la vérité se contredit cent fois par jour comme une bonne bavarde qu’elle est.’ (Cendrars, 1989: 25).

Cendrars helps us to understand that we are constantly rewriting the past as new events and present developments change our understanding of the narrative we have formed about it. It is impossible to see the past as finished; its meaning is always deferred and differing. His own early twentieth-century record of plagiarism and collage displays a

postmodern irreverence for concepts of authorship and textual determinacy. The genuine existence of *La Légende de Novgorode* ultimately does not matter. What then is to be made of the supposed discovery of *La Légende de Novgorode* in September 1995 and the attention that it received?

News of Kiril Kadiiski's find in a second-hand bookshop in Sofia was published in the mainstream literary sections of newspapers such as *Le Monde* and commented on in more specialist literary reviews such as *La Quinzaine littéraire*.⁴ Following the discovery and initial publication in Bulgarian by Kadiiski, two versions of *La Légende de Novgorode* were published in French in rapid succession by *fata morgana*. An almost apologetic 'tentative de restitution en français' was quickly published and edited by the poet's daughter, Miriam Cendrars, in 1996 including a facsimile of the found document. Another version was published in 1997, containing amendments to the translation, a facsimile and images by Pierre Alechinsky. Both of these books are now out of print, a seemingly familiar fate for *La Légende de Novgorode*.

Scholars of Cendrars's work were unsurprisingly astounded by Kadiiski's unexpected discovery and immediately set out to examine its authenticity. In true Cendrarsian style, Kadiiski found a book containing 14 pages (not 106), published in 1907 (not 1909) with only its cover (instead of the whole book) printed in white on black paper. But perhaps the most surprising aspect of this discovery was that the poem exists in Russian, and in a Russian used before 1917, in a Cyrillic alphabet of which some characters no longer exist. The manuscript in French has still not yet been found. Thus, Kadiiski had not discovered the original text, but a second text supposedly created by the enigmatic R.R., of whom nothing is known, not even his full name.⁵ The team who

worked on a translation of this Russian version were fully aware of the problems caused by producing a translation of a translation. They comment on this and on their hope of finding the original manuscript in the ‘Notes des traducteurs’ published in the initial edition in 1996:

‘Nous ne considérons pas comme définitive la restitution de *La Légende de Novgorode* que nous donnons ici: elle est la proposition d’un travail en commun qui peut servir de base à de nouvelles recherches et à l’analyse des tout premiers textes de Frédéric Sauser [. . .] en attendant la découverte du manuscrit original. Désormais, tous les espoirs sont permis!’ (Cendrars, 1996: 49)

Instead of clarifying the mythical status of *La Légende de Novgorode*, the translation of a translation does just the opposite and accentuates the mystery in which the text is shrouded. The reader cannot be sure whether this is the translation of the authentic text. Furthermore, as it is a translation, this primary text does not lend itself to extended analysis of the finer detail of Cendrars’s textuality. Indeed, it seems rather indistinct and average in comparison to Cendrars’s published poetic texts.

Eleven years after its initial unearthing, in 2007, a young academic, Oxana Khlopina, denounced this discovery, basing her findings on a systematic analysis of Russian grammar and spelling used in this text and the anachronistic typeface used for the title page (Klopina, 2007). She asserted explicitly for the first time – with supposedly concrete proof - that the published *Légende de Novgorode* was in fact a fake. This news

made *Le Figaro* and created quite a controversy in Cendrarsian circles (Stainville, 2007). Khlopina's thesis led to heated discussion between various Cendrars specialists, Khlopina, Kadiiski and the head of the publishing house *fata morgana*, Bruno Roy, on a blog hosted by *Courrier International*.⁶ The legitimacy of *La Légende de Novgorode* is therefore still very much contested and it seems highly likely that it is a fake.⁷ Further material analyses on the ink and the paper have been prevented through the sale of the original work to a private collector.

But surely this text that may not exist is a tongue-in-cheek disavowal both of Cendrars's own reliability as an author and of the business of literary history more generally? Does the discovery of this potentially fake Russian text, and all the energy devoted to translating and commenting on it, not work as a very neat punchline to an avant-garde joke about critics and history sown nearly a century earlier in *L'Homme foudroyé*? Indeed, this trap is not avoided in critical material accompanying the first publication of this text in 1996. Several thematic elements are explored which appear to suggest that this poem is by Cendrars. For example, the overt influence of Arthur Rimbaud which can be detected from the second line onwards:

'Lorsqu'on a dix-sept ans - comme a dit Arthur Rimbaud -
on n'a que poésie et amour en tête... C'était une même soirée suffocante,
les tilleuls enivraient comme la bière de Munich.' (Cendrars, 1997: 35)

This reference is to Rimbaud's poem 'Roman', written in 1870 and published in *Le Reliquaire* in 1891, which is also concerned with lime trees, being seventeen and drinking beer:

'On n'est pas sérieux, quand on a dix-sept ans.

Un beau soir, foin des bocks et de la limonade,

Des cafés tapageurs aux lustres éclatants!

On va sous les tilleuls verts de la promenade.' (Rimbaud, 2009: 89-90)

In Cendrars's later poems, Rimbaud's influence is still present, which is by no means unusual for an innovative poet of this generation. Jean Cocteau even compared the *Prose du Transsibérien* to 'Le Bateau ivre', calling it a 'véritable train saoul' (Scott, 1993: 58). In Cendrars's *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques*, there are several direct references to Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, for example, the first line of 'Titres': 'Formes sueurs chevelures' (Cendrars, 2001, 89) refers to 'Barbare' in *Illuminations*: 'Ô Douceurs, ô monde, ô musique! Et là, les formes, les sueurs, les chevelures...' (Rimbaud, 2009, 310). More generally, both poet-adventurers express a similar attitude to art and life, characteristic of the historic avant-gardes, and expressed in *La Légende de Novgorode* as follows: 'Je voulais m'engouffrer dans la vie de la poésie / et pour cela il me fallait traverser la poésie de la vie' (Cendrars, 1997: 35). Nevertheless, if *La Légende de Novgorode* and 'Roman' share the same carefree atmosphere in their opening lines, they do not develop in the same manner. Rimbaud's poem explores the themes of adolescence, love, deception and ends in a circular movement with the same verse as the beginning,

thus emphasising the lightness and frivolity of a teenager's summertime existence. *La Légende de Novgorode* does not continue in this vein. A journey is being prepared during which the reader meets various subjects that will return in Cendrars's later work: religion, fire, revolution and, of course, the infamous Transsiberian train.

Autobiographical references also abound in *La Légende de Novgorode*, which should surely warn the reader, familiar with Cendrars's work, that things may not be quite what they seem. There are references to his stay in Russia through the proper names quoted, for example, Rogovine - not to be confused with the mention of Rogojine four lines earlier, from Dostoevskii's *Idiot*, whereas the former refers to Cendrars's employer during his stay in Saint Petersburg - as well as the impact of the 1905 Revolution ('comme sur les grévistes de Gapone...' (Cendrars, 1997: 41)) which he experienced during this stay. There are also allusions to his childhood in Neuchâtel and Naples through the images of running away and German beer.⁸ Furthermore, the recurrent imagery of fire and ash indicates the well-known birth of a new poet:

'je voyais les incendies futurs et derrière eux cheminaient les hermines
du rouge empire russe, cendre froide, blanche comme le givre
avec ses tisons noirs...Et je me suis vu moi-même cendre
après l'incendie des sentiments et de l'espoir. Eternel incendie.'

(Cendrars, 1997: 30)

When Cendrars allegedly wrote this poem, he was still called Frédéric Sausser, his birth name. The first poem that Cendrars signed with his pseudonym was *Les Pâques à New*

York, written five years later. His first name, Blaise, comes from ‘braise’ and his surname, Cendrars, from ‘cendres’, thus the image of fire is introduced through his choice of name.⁹ It has been well documented how each time he writes, Cendrars symbolically effectuates the same act as the phoenix. Frédéric Sauser frees himself, by the choice of a new name, from a past, a family and a country. This symbolic act is reflected in his poetic projects. He is able to create a new poetics free from any constraints, in an attempt to convey the experience of modernity, a project which takes form in the collection *Du monde entier*. It has also been argued that this idea for a pseudonym could come from an event in Cendrars’s adolescent life: ‘car on a enlevé mon Hélène / et Troie est déjà réduite en cendres’ (Cendrars, 1997: 38). In Saint Petersburg, Frédéric Sauser had fallen in love with a young girl, Hélène, who died in a fire in 1907. The eminent Cendrars specialist, Claude Leroy, has seen in the initials of the title of *La Légende de Novgorode* a ‘titre-tombeau’: LN, which provides a lynchpin for Cendrars’s creative endeavours through the imaginary space that it creates and occupies. (Cendrars, 1996: 54; Leroy, 1996: 87-88)

Furthermore, in *La Légende de Novgorode*, indications of several future works by Cendrars are to be found. For example, the religious images of a human-like Christ and bells recall similar images in *Les Pâques à New York* and also Guillaume Apollinaire’s ‘Zone’. The old monk figure also plays a role in *Les Pâques à New York* and the *Prose du Transsibérien*. The most obvious parallel is with this latter text. In *La Légende de Novgorode*, the journey on the Transsiberian is planned for the next day; it belongs to the future and is thus imagined using the future tense. This imagined journey takes on almost

diabolical tones and is therefore closely linked to the journey towards death depicted throughout the *Prose du Transsibérien*:

‘Rogovine, mon bienfaiteur, nous étonnera, s’occupant lui-même du train,
enfournant des briquettes de roubles dans la gueule rouge de la
locomotive,
pour nous entraîner toujours plus loin, plus loin, et pour nous faire fuir
ce qui nous attend tous - et les riches et les pauvres -
au bout du chemin terrestre...’ (Cendrars, 1997: 40)

The reader meets Jeanne for the first time, the young prostitute, who reminds us of the religious icon and who personifies France, ‘le vieux monde’ and its traditions in the *Prose du Transsibérien*: ‘Demain quand ma Jeanne et moi prendrons l’express Transsibérien’; ‘Demain quand nous nous enfuirons dans l’express Transsibérien, / la petite Jeanne et moi’ (Cendrars, 1997: 40, 42). *La Légende de Novgorode*, however, is not a travel poem in the same way as the *Prose du Transsibérien*. It instead invokes the possibilities of a journey to come. Cendrars also talks about his abilities as a poet in the very first line of *La Légende de Novgorode*: ‘C’est alors seulement que j’étais un vrai poète’. In comparison, a leitmotif of the *Prose du Transsibérien* is the poet’s affirmation: ‘Et j’étais déjà si mauvais poète’ (Cendrars, 2001: 19), thus seemingly juxtaposing the poet’s differing attitudes to his ability. Interestingly, the opening line of the first translation of *La Légende de Novgorode* reads ‘En ce temps-là j’étais un vrai poète’, mirroring the first line of the *Prose du Transsibérien*: ‘En ce temps-là j’étais en mon

adolescence' and in turn underlining the influence of Cendrars's later work on the translation of the Russian text.

Certain thematic and autobiographical tendencies may suggest that *La Légende de Novgorode* is by Cendrars, but the reappearance of Cendrars's first poem does not give definitive answers to the many questions concerning its authenticity and Cendrars's ambiguous approach to his work and authorship underlines this uncertainty. The poet, Frédéric Jacques Temple, who helped with the initial translation of the discovered text, described Kiril Kadiiski as an 'inventeur' and stated: 'Je ne fus pas le seul à accuser le coup en apprenant cette stupéfiante nouvelle' (Cendrars, 1996: 14). This translation of a translation in no way reveals the brilliance of Cendrars's later poetic experimentation, but rather various dismantled themes expressed in a rather disappointing manner. Any poetic clumsiness could of course be attributed to Sauser's young age when he supposedly wrote this poem and the fact that he had not yet invented himself as Blaise Cendrars, poet and writer. And yet, we cannot be sure that this poem is authentic, as it seems as if anyone well versed in Cendrars's poetry and prose could have written it, inserting themes that appear later on in his poetry. Furthermore, it could be argued that the fact that scholars have tried to establish the authenticity of the work would seem to contradict Cendrars's understanding of authentic art which recognises its own indeterminacy, its openness to being constantly rewritten or reworked through time.

The discovery (or not) of *La Légende de Novgorode* is actually insignificant: it is a translation of a translation and its authenticity is obviously far from sure. The importance of *La Légende de Novgorode* lies not in its discovery as authentic or forged text, but rather in its existence as a textless title, in its very textual absence. The questions

of why Cendrars gave this poem such a prominent position and chose to situate his literary beginnings in a Russian legend could be said to cast light on the creative process itself, particularly as this legend also appears to have multiple existences. Several legends dating from fifteenth-century Novgorod tell of various saints and monks; the roots and sources of these legends are diverse (Kuskov, 1980: 192-205). *La Légende de Novgorode* is above all a first attempt, a poetic beginning of sorts, a type of literary promise. Furthermore, the use of the word 'legend' in this title is significant. Legend has its etymological origins in the Latin 'legenda', meaning 'things to be read'. Originally legends were the stories of the lives of saints to be read in religious surroundings. Subsidiary meanings of the term include a story or narrative lying somewhere between historical fact and myth (Cuddon, 1999: 451-52). By using 'legend' in the title, Cendrars inscribes this text in the world of the literary, as it is to be read, but also situates its contents within the realm of the possible, at the same time underlining the mobile parameters of this realm.

La Légende de Novgorode is not the only example of the absence of a text being the source of literary creativity. A parallel can be drawn between this poemless title and the famous correspondence between Antonin Artaud and, critic and editor of the *Nouvelle Revue française*, Jacques Rivière. Artaud sent some poems to Rivière, who refused to publish them in his review. This refusal gave rise to an exchange of letters in which Artaud explained and justified his poetry. Rivière found this epistolary dialogue, which ultimately evokes the possibility of literature, so revealing that he decided to publish it, whilst still refusing to publish the poems. This anomaly is evoked by Blanchot in *Le Livre à venir*:

‘Des poèmes qu’il juge insuffisants et indignes d’être publiés cessent de l’être, lorsqu’ils sont complétés par le récit de l’expérience de leur insuffisance. Comme si ce qui leur manquait, leur défaut, devenait plénitude et achèvement par l’expression ouverte de ce manque et l’approfondissement de sa nécessité.’ (Blanchot, 1971: 53)

For over eighty years then, the absence of *La Légende de Novgorode* was completed by its presence in Cendrars’s bibliographical lists and in the numerous descriptions in his other works. The disappearance of this text was not necessarily a deliberated choice, but the fact that Cendrars chose not to recreate or find it constitutes an essential decision.¹⁰ Blanchot’s idea of ‘a book to come’ is interesting with regard to Cendrars’s *La Légende de Novgorode*. It does not mean an ideal book, with the potential to contain and express the entirety of human experience, ‘le Livre’ to which Mallarmé and countless other writers have aspired.¹¹ It does not mean that the book, as an object, will be found, that it will form an actual, tangible part of a literary present. Instead it bears witness to the idea of coming itself and the possibilities and potential that this opens up. The ‘to come’ points to the future which, although never existing fully in the present, affects the present through its imaginary potential. *La Légende de Novgorode* is thus relevant to Cendrars’s literary output in its position as a promised founding text.

This chosen absence can be compared to ‘Le Carnet du bois de pin’ by Francis Ponge, which contains no finished, polished text, instead only rough versions. The reader finds fragments of experimentation in verse and prose and semantic research carried out

in *Le Littré*, all in the failed attempt to attain a formula to understand and render the reality of a pine forest and to express reality in as literal a manner as possible, which will ultimately be overcome by the poem itself: 'Mais ici mon dessein n'est pas de faire un poème, mais d'avancer dans la connaissance et l'expression du bois de pins' (Ponge, 1976: 144). Ponge could have chosen not to publish these attempts, thus showing no-one that he had failed to fulfil his aim. Instead he prefers to underline the difficulty, impossibility even, of expressing an object using words through the absence of any completed poem.

A more contemporary example can also help us understand the strange status of *La Légende de Novgorode*. Over a period of twenty-five years, Claude Royet-Journoud published with Gallimard, in their 'Blanche' collection, a series of four works: *Le Renversement* (1972), *La Notion d'obstacle* (1978), *Les Objets contiennent l'infini* (1983) and *Les Natures indivisibles* (1997). These works form a whole, which aspires to Mallarmé's notion of 'le Livre', but also question the idea of the unfinished. They are composed of short fragments of verse, laid out on the page in a disparate, irregular manner. Royet-Journoud states that he initially writes at least four hundred pages of dense prose for each book which is considerably shorter in published form. He considers this form of pre-writing to be without literary value and therefore refuses to publish it. In a conversation with Emmanuel Hocquard, first published in an issue of *Action poétique* dedicated to the work of Claude Royet-Journoud in March 1982, he declares:

'Pour écrire j'ai besoin d'un temps de travail très long. Il y a des gens qui sont 'habités' par la langue; moi ce n'est pas le cas. Il n'y a jamais rien. Je

‘passe mon temps avec rien et je m’obstine et j’insiste sur ce rien et donc il y a d’abord ce travail qui est très corporel, qui consiste à écrire une grande quantité de prose sans valeur littéraire. Ce n’est qu’une façon de se nettoyer, de faire le vide, en sorte qu’au bout d’un certain nombre d’heures par jour, par semaine, par mois d’un travail permanent, on arrive à sentir que ça bascule et que le monde devient lisible.’ (Hocquard, 1987: 157)

Similarly to *La Légende de Novgorode* before 1995, no-one has ever seen or read this pre-writing, all sixteen hundred pages of it. Whether it exists or not is of little importance because again what is important here is the author’s decision to complete his work using the absence of part of it. The author chooses the fragments that he wants to use and then leaves no trace of this intervention for the reader. Through this process of pre-writing and selection, Royet-Journoud sets up a type of poetic distancing. He creates a *mise-en-abyme*, a language within a language with its own closed and non-referential system to which the reader is not granted access. These references to works by Ponge, Royet-Journoud and a controversy between Rivière and Artaud help to clarify the ambiguous position of *La Légende de Novgorode* within Cendrars’s literary production by demonstrating how the provisional, unfinished and indeed unwritten work can be a legitimate foundation for literary creativity, shifting the emphasis from content to process of writing.

The (non-)existence of *La Légende de Novgorode* should be analysed as proof of a conscious decision to write and to publish, shifting the emphasis from the contents of the poem to the act of writing itself. Cendrars mixes the real and the literary in order to

establish his own reality and to nurture readers' expectations concerning this reality.

Indeed, the only place that *La Légende de Novgorode* has ever existed for certain is in the works of Blaise Cendrars. What matters then is not whether this text actually exists, but whether Cendrars states or writes that it exists. The reader's subsequent reaction adds another, complicating - imaginary - layer. It is no longer a question of speculating on the disappearance and the discovery of this work. *La Légende de Novgorode*'s literary value in fact lies in its potential as an imagined and imaginary text. Cendrars creates a work that is mythical (and not mythomaniac) and becomes more real through its very absence. As the writer (or journalist in this instance) states in *Hollywood*:

‘plus un ‘papier’ est vrai, plus il doit paraître imaginaire. A force de coller aux choses, il doit déteindre sur elles et non pas les décalquer. Et c’est encore pourquoi l’écriture n’est ni un mensonge ni un songe, mais de la réalité, et peut-être tout ce que nous pourrions jamais connaître de réel.’

(Cendrars, 2001b: 43)

This lack of a text may well negate readers' expectations in a similar way to the plagiarising and borrowing techniques, for which Cendrars is well known. But it also opens Cendrars's œuvre to the potential and possibilities offered by a promised work.

¹ ‘traduit en russe sur le manuscrit de l’auteur, par R.R., tirage en blanc sur papier noir, Moscou, Sozonoff, 1909. 1 vol. in-12 carre. Hors commerce.’; ‘traduit en russe par R.R. sur le manuscrit; tirage en blanc sur papier noir; 14 exemplaires numérotés et signés. Moscou, Sozonov, 1909. Un volume in-12 carré.’ (Cendrars, 1996: 55)

² ‘J’étais retourné en Russie l’année auparavant; à Moscou on avait publié de moi une plaquette de vers non signé.’ (Cendrars, 2002: 205); ‘J’ai commencé à écrire vers l’âge de 18 ans. Mon premier roman a paru à Saint-Pétersbourg, en russe, et il n’a jamais été traduit en français. On en a fait un tirage de quatorze exemplaires imprimé en blanc sur papier noir.’ (Cendrars, 1996: 56)

³ As A. T’Serstevens points out: ‘D’année en année, Blaise m’a donné de vive voix six versions de son équipée du Transsibérien, toutes plus belles les unes que les autres, et différentes de celle du poème.’ (A. T’Serstevens, 1972: 26)

⁴ ‘Blaise Cendrars et la légende retrouvée de Novgorod’, *Le Monde*, 1 January 1997, p. 1; ‘La Légende de Cendrars refait surface’, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 707, 1-15 January 1997, p. 9.

⁵ In *Le Lotissement du ciel*, Cendrars writes nostalgically about R.R., an old librarian, who was apparently very influential in terms of Cendrars’s reading and writing habits during his stay in Russia: ‘ce vieil homme qui m’était si cordialement attaché, au point que le savant linguiste dirigeait les lectures d’un apprenti bijoutier à la manqué et le poussait à écrire, et à qui j’eus l’audace de confier mon premier manuscrit, et qu’il eut la patience de traduire à mon insu et la générosité de faire publier à ses frais, y engloutissant ses dernières économies avant sa mort pour me faire une énorme surprise et m’encourager.’ (Cendrars, 2005: 279)

⁶ ‘Quand La Légende de Novgorod devient polémique (suite)’:

<http://alest.blogs.courrierinternational.com/la-france-vue-d-ailleurs/>, accessed 12 October 2009.

⁷ Dany Savelli has carried out detailed research into the paratexts (the address and phone number of the publisher, the catalogue following the text, etc.) of *La Légende de Novgorode* which would appear to indicate that it is a fake, although this is not the definitive conclusion of her article (Savelli, 2005, 21-33). Christine Le Quellec Cottier also discusses the authenticity of this work (Le Quellec Cottier, 2004: 129-40).

⁸ ‘les tilleuls enivraient comme la bière de Munich [. . .] Et moi, comme un somnambule, je descendais du cinquième étage le long de la gouttière; / moi, ce jour-là, je m’enfuyais de la maison de mon père. (Cendrars, 1997: 35)

⁹ ‘L’écriture est un incendie qui embrase un grand remue-ménage d’idées et qui fait flamboyer des associations d’image avant de les réduire en *braises* crépitantes et en *cendres* retombantes. Mais si la flamme déclenche l’alerte, la spontanéité du feu reste mystérieuse. Car écrire c’est brûler vif, mais c’est aussi renaître de ses cendres.’ (Cendrars, 2002: 9)

¹⁰ As Claude Leroy explained before Kadiiski’s discovery: ‘Ni l’interprétation réaliste de la disparition, ni sa traduction symbolique, ne sont pleinement convaincantes. Le bénéfice imaginaire de la perte ne prouve pas l’inexistence du livre, et Cendrars s’entend à faire de nécessité vertu. La découverte d’un exemplaire, si elle advenait un jour, ne frapperait pas davantage de nullité les spéculations sur l’absence du premier livre.’ (Leroy, 1996: 85)

¹¹ ‘tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre.’ (Mallarmé, 1945: 378)

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