

*The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Spring 2005, Vol. XXV, No. 1, pp. 139-140

Blaise Cendrars. *Moravagine*. Trans. Alan Brown and intro. Paul La Farge. New York Review Books, 2004. 229 pp. Paper: \$14.00.

Seventy-eight years after its initial publication, the second novel by Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) remains a gripping narrative that unveils the workings of anarchists, explores the mind of a serial killer, and turns notions of health and sickness inside out. *Moravagine* (death-to-the-vagina) is a dynamo possessing acute mental prowess and charisma, and he is bent on destruction. The action traverses continents and oceans, leaping from regicide to the slaughter of an Amazonian tribe, and ending in the First World War. Dr. Raymond la Science, the narrator, is numb to much of life, and while *Moravagine* runs amok, he offers disquisitions on the law of utility and the state of mental treatment circa 1900. He is terrified of his friend and in /140/ love with his uninhibited nature. Cendrars writes poetic lines, and his use of different formats—medical language, social commentary, aspects of the thriller and picaresque—keep the tension alive, allowing swift depictions of brutal scenes to rest alongside intensely lyrical descriptions. A trip down a South American river is as hypnotic for the reader as for the narrator, and the words match the content (Alan Brown's translation is excellent). There is not simply craft in this novel, there is true art and some prophecy. Cendrars saw that in the aftermath of the First World War *Moravagine* would be everywhere. He is in the columns devoted to nerve-gas attacks, letters containing spores, needless warfare conducted for shady reasons, and the slaying of prostitutes and children. His "health," in Raymond's view, is excellent. La Farge's introduction gives readers an interesting perspective on the literary genesis of the novel and an opinion on the psychological context of *Moravagine*'s creation. Ultimately, few readers will be swayed by talk of the stylistic devices, the literary control, and the voice that switches from scientific to poetic to demotic and essayistic with astonishing ease and confidence. What a reader will be affected by most is the prose itself. After almost eighty years *Moravagine* retains the capacity to shock, to jolt, to bring out admiration. It's one hell of an adventure.