

Blaise Cendrars. *Gold: The Marvellous History of General John Augustus Sutter*. Trans. Nina Rootes. Peter Owen, 2003. 128 pp. Paper: \$18.95.

Gold is Blaise Cendrars's leanest novel, written mainly in brief lines and compact imagery, a lesson in economy and precision that minimalists would envy. It is also a masterly act of mythologizing. Cendrars transforms the historical Sutter, on whose California property was found the gold that launched the Gold Rush of 1848, into a larger-than-life character whose ambition, drive, and bloody-mindedness encounter the similar ambition and greed of those who want to wrest money out of his land. Sutter left the Old World to make his name and a fortune in the New, and invents paradise using productive farmland, thereby creating a self-sustaining fiefdom, an idyllic place for everyone except the slaves and Indians. "And after having ventured all, risked all, dared all and created for himself a way of life, he is ruined by the discovery of gold-mines on his lands," as Cendrars laconically puts it. Sutter's political manoeuvring with Mexican and Washington politicians, as well as the brutal assault on his property and family by "stampeding mobs of people," are crisply set down in this mix of morality play, Greek tragedy, and reportage. Published originally in 1925, translated into over a dozen languages, and rarely out of print, this was Cendrars's first novel, written after he decided that poetry, to which he had devoted himself since 1911, held no more challenge. He would go on to write four other novels by 1930. Aside from its sheer readability, this "marvellous history" is an essential work in discovering how Cendrars combined the terseness of his poetry with his idea of what the novel form could do. "Hinge" novels are often of historical interest only; *Gold* is of interest for its own sake.