

Cendrars, Blaise

By [Laurence Campa](#)

Cendrars, *Blaise*
Swiss writer, later a naturalized Frenchman
Born 01 September 1887 in La Chaux-de Fonds, Switzerland
Died 21 January 1961 in Paris, France

The life and works of the poet Blaise Cendrars testify to a disturbing paradox: while encapsulating the trauma that was the result from his war experience, they also illustrate the creative virtues of disability due to the war.

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During World War I

An avant-garde poet, sharing a certain affinity with [Guillaume Apollinaire \(1880-1918\)](#) and the Cubists, Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) and the Italian poet [Ricciotto Canudo \(1877-1923\)](#) published an appeal to all foreigners living in [France](#) on the eve of the mobilization. Cendrars himself enlisted as a foreign volunteer in September 1914 and fought on the [Somme](#) until the summer of 1915. Having joined the Foreign Legion, his regiment was stationed in the Vosges, then took part in the second [Champagne offensive](#). On 28 September 1915, in the rank of corporal, he was seriously wounded during the attack on Navarin farm. His right arm had to be amputated. Naturalized a Frenchman on 16 February 1916, he had to learn how to live as a left-handed person. After a serious existential crisis in September 1917, he had the revelation that his disability had had such a fundamental impact on his life that he had become a new writer, too. In 1918, he published a work of poetic prose titled *J'ai tué*, illustrated by the painter [Fernand Léger \(1881-1955\)](#), which breaks the taboo concerning deliberately inflicted death, as testimonies usually depicted the received death.

Post-War Writer

Because of his refusal to be a war writer, Blaise Cendrars remained incapable of reflecting on the wounds and traumas he had suffered during the war. Though his novels *Moravagine* (1928) and *Dan Yack* (1929) are haunted by the war, and the fact that he did revisit a military life as a reporter with the British Army in 1940, it was not until his retreat in Aix-en-Provence during the German occupation that he was able to write his memoirs, particularly, *La Main Coupée*. Published in 1946, this literary memorial was dedicated to his lost friends, which also functions as a [cenotaph](#) for his lost hand. It received critical and popular acclaim comparable to [Curzio Malaparte's \(1898-1957\) Kaputt](#). Throughout his life, the one-armed poet never ceased to reinvent himself through writing, rising from the ashes time and again.

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