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Arthur Cravan

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Interval : Arthur Cravan

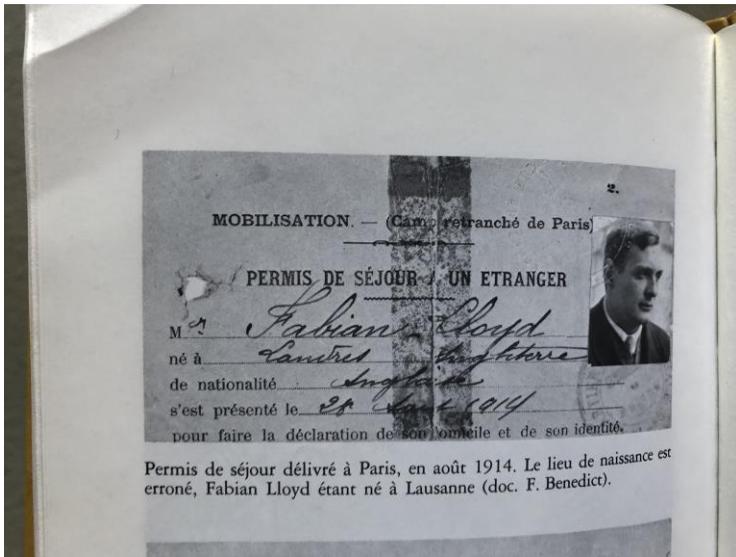
“I have twenty countries in my memory and I drag the colours of a hundred cities in my soul.”¹

And now arrives Arthur Cravan, just presented as, perhaps, he would have wished. ²And so *Maintenant*, with its five issues has arrived and taken over. A *personal confession*: I have to say, that during a time in Rome in 2016, in a corner bookshop, far from everything I found a copy of *Maintenant*, which by happenstance convinced me to write this book. It was happenstance, for I was in Rome, doing something else entirely (I was there to speak on Pablo Echaurren, and his remaking of Marcel Duchamp’s toilet and such and I had exhausted myself climbing up the steps to see the exhibition, prompted by my friend Daniela Daniele) but there I was. ³So the Arthur Cravan

interruption was totally unforeseen, and for that reason continues to seem somewhat miraculous.

So Arthur Cravan. Fabian Avenarius
Lloyd

a.k.a. Arthur Cravan, about whom almost everything should be, has to be, in capitals with exclamation points following. Sometimes he was also Edouard Archinard, ⁴and some others (Isaac Cravan, Dorian Hope, Sebastian Hope, B. Holland, Robert Miadique, Marie Lowitska, W. Cooper, James M. Hayes. Why not?



When he was in the boxing ring, which happened when he needed money, he would rise and announce himself with at least 32 occupations, including poet, professor, boxer, dandy, *flâneur*, forget, critic, sailor, prospector, card sharper, lumberjack, *bricoleur*, thief, editor, and chauffeur.



Except that, of course, and this is part of the Cravan Excitement, we have absolutely no idea which of these qualifications were befitting, given the multiple myths around him, none of them uninteresting. In Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia's piece following that of Roger Conover in 4 *Dada Suicides*, about "Arthur Cravan and American Dada"-- and I might as well quote her, since it sums up the case -- when they were in Mexico, his idea for a boxing club had not panned out, he had no more resources , and they decided to go to another country.

Mina Loy had preceded him to Buenos Aires, where he was to join her by sea, on a little yacht that he was equipping little by

little for the long journey. Every day he left the town to carry provisions to the yacht, which was anchored farther down the bay. One day he did not come back from his customary visit to the yacht, and since that time nobody has heard from him. It seemed possible for a long time that he might be on some island, or in the prisons of one of the numerous countries at war; and his wife looked for him after the Armistice in every possible place of this kind. But no jail had heard from him, and it has finally become more and more evident that the mystery surrounding the end of this amazing figure will never be cleared up. ⁵

He is definitely the most Dada of the pre-Dadas.

Very DADA he was, Arthur Cravan, and capitalized in his case the term should be, and far beyond the weakened adaptation: “Dadaism.” One of the glorious things about his one-person publication *Maintenant* is that its presentation as if written by various pens under various names is reminiscent of the brilliant publication of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *La Dernière Mode*, over the re-reading of which Mallarmé lingered many an evening. It is in fact a gender-fluid dream, and includes texts by all sorts of persons of both sexes, quoted and writing, of all sorts of professions: Mme de P, Ix, Le Chef de Bouche Chez Brabant, Olympe, une Negresse, Miss Satin, Marguerite de Ponty, after Marliani, according to Toussenel, Marasquin, a Breton Chatelaine, a Creole Lady, A grandmother, and “a Reader from Alsace”.

I am certainly not claiming that Arthur Cravan had the kind of delicately elegant distinction or the kind of intellect of Mallarmé but they were each a genius unlike any other ever, and their multiple personalities are especially enchanting to contemplate in their intense oppositions alongside each other.

So what most know about him is that he – actually either 6 feet or 6 feet 4, about 230 pounds with 19 inches around his biceps, a blond, entered the ring with Jack Johnson, a hefty experienced black man – and was knocked out

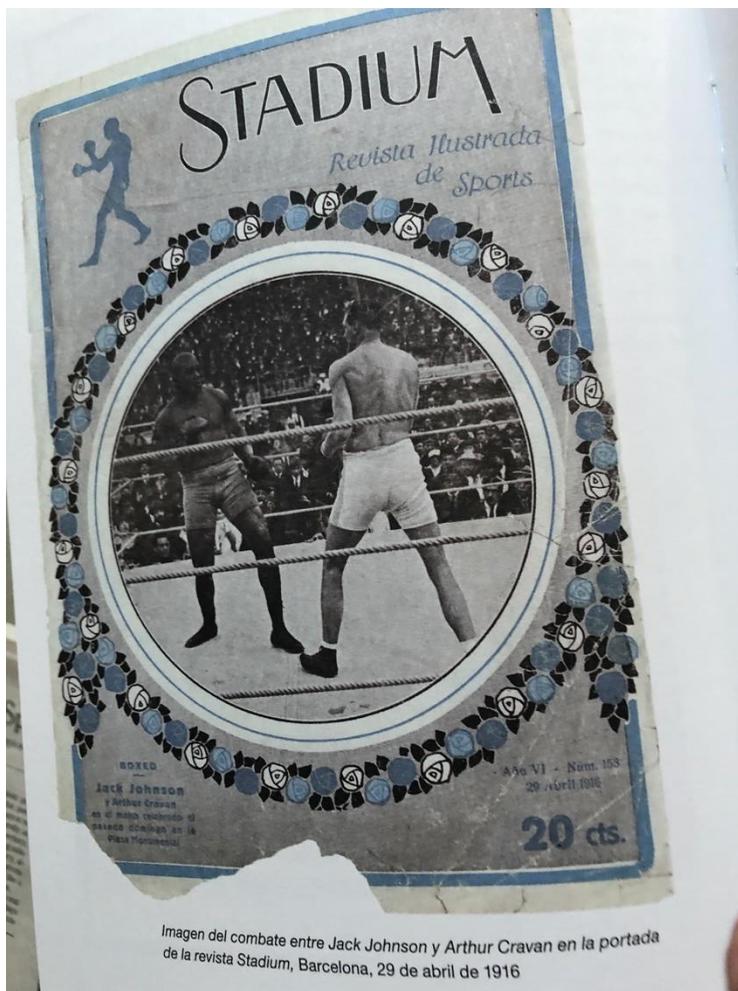


Imagen del combate entre Jack Johnson y Arthur Cravan en la portada de la revista Stadium, Barcelona, 29 de abril de 1916

Arthur Cravan, as he began to call himself in 1912, was, as Conover puts it, a world tramp and totally immoderate, seeking the extremes and generally finding them, a bum (thus, completely adapted to Mina Loy's writing so frequently about bums and indeed, appropriately as a criminal-angel like her crab-angel bums) and an elegant dresser, when he chose, as he often did not, wearing torn shirts and shorts with tattoos showing or then not, throwing his dirty laundry at the audience during his lecture at the New York Independents Exhibition in 1917, and, when he was already undress, was hauled off to jail in manacles. . He would wear a soldier's uniform and hitchhike to neutral ground to defy the whole idea of war. Appearance and reality were both terms to be confronted. AND of course he would sign letters as Oscar Wilde his uncle and offer them to dealers and collectors, both

in London and Dublin in 1922, sometimes offering these forgeries as Sebastian Hope, representing Pierre Louÿs one of Wilde's translators into French. or then offering (fake) letters by André Gide, who modeled Lafcadio in *Les Caves du Vatican* on Cravan, . which makes a good deal of sense. Cravan was the most preposterous and altogether unlikely match for anyone, and he and Mina Loy fell madly, that is indeed the word, in love. ⁶

He loved his body and so did Mina. "Genius," he said, "is nothing more than an extraordinary manifestation of the body." ⁷He did not just lecture, although he could, on Egyptian art among hundreds of other topics, especially the classics and modern art, but he would always perform. At a meeting of the Société des Savants, he would fire shots into the air, scarcely what the *savants* were expecting.

Umsuspected

Nothing about Cravan is what anyone might suspect. I was astounded by his poetry, and found it enlivening even as it had not the twists and turns of Mina Loy's poems in all their various transmogrifications. Cravan's poems are loud and adventuresome, like himself, whereas hers are more interior in their curling around themselves, it seems to me. His are right there, obvious, like his body, and it was, perhaps, that body that set them body dreaming. Here are some poems, enticing, and complete in themselves, whereas
in hers, you are sent or invited elsewhere.

All those of us fascinated by Cravan must have differing ways of keeping and sharing that fascination. Mine at the moment of writing this is the way number 1 of *Maintenant* opens with a WHISTLE, a *Sifflet* :

*Le rythme de l'Océan berce les
transatlantiques,
Et dans l'air où les gaz dansent tels
des toupies,
Tandis que siffle le rapide héroïque
qui arrive au Havre,
S'avancent comme des ours les
matelots athlétiques.
New York! New York! Je voudrais
t'habiter.
Des ascenseurs...*

Whistle

*Decks lulled by the rhythm of the
Ocean,
While in the air gases swirl like
twirling tops,
And the heroic express arrives whistling
into Le Havre,
Athletic sailors approach like
bears.
New York! New York! How I want to
inhabit you!*

Both Cravan and Mina Loy loved their dreams, including their super-impo-
verished marriage. As Cravan put it:

You must dream your life with great
care

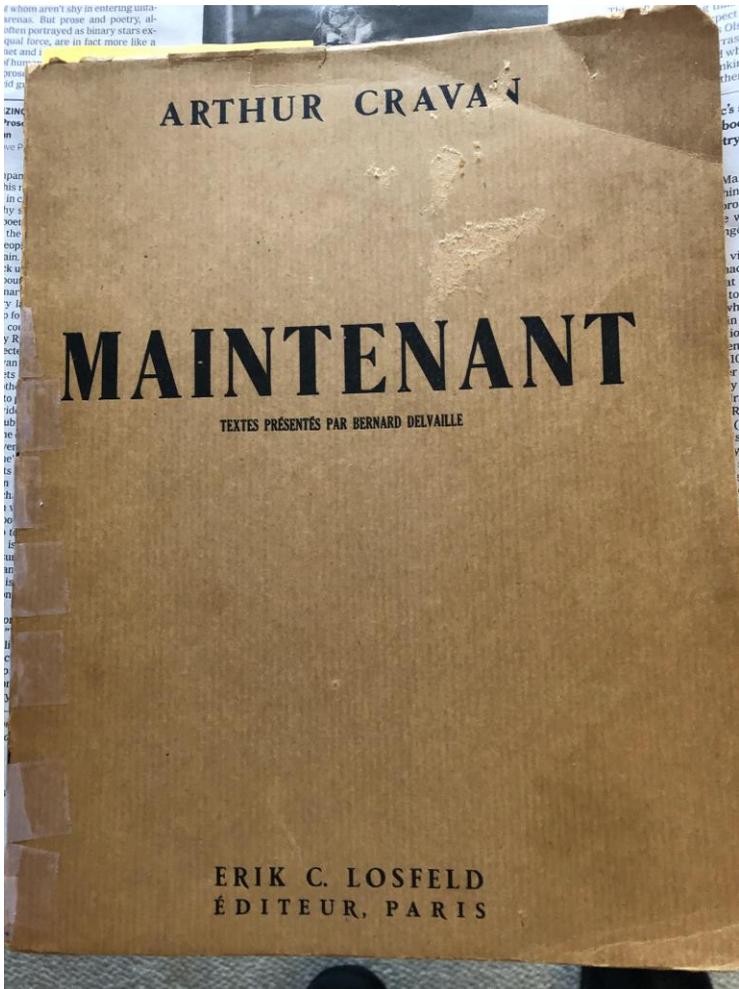
Instead of living it as merely an



amusement. ⁸

Very DADA he was, capitalized in his case it should be, and far beyond the weakened term “Dadaism.” One of the glorious things about his one-person publication *Maintenant*, which he sold from a vegetable cart, is that its presentation as if written by various pens under various names is reminiscent of the brilliant publication of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *La Dernière Mode*, about

which he often said that it was a sort of dream. Cravan in all his guises was less a dream than a life, and he was Mina Loy's obsession for the major part of hers.



It is in fact a gender-fluid dream, and includes texts by all sorts of persons of both sexes, quoted and writing, of all sorts

of :professions: Mme de P, Ix, Le Chef de Bouche Chez Brabant, Olympe, une Negresse, Miss Satin, Marguerite de Ponty, after Marliani, according to Toussenel, Marasquin, a Breton Chatelaine, a Creole Lady, A grandmother, and “a Reader from Alsace”.

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One of the most intriguing pieces in *Maintenant* (the name is “Now” rather like Mallarmé ‘s Most Recent fashion) begins issue I” To Be or Not To Be ...American. “ We feel the hesitations and oppositions even through the ironic. Again, we feel the relation to Albert-Birot's "Nunism" or nowism, to the ideas of Vitalism and

Futurism: we might have the justified feeling that everything and everyone in Mina Loy's life relates to everything and everyone else.

On that topic, here is a permit, ascribing the wrong birthplace: typical of much else about this more than remarkable character, unusual in every way. Everything wrong turns out to be right, for Cravan.

MOBILISATION. — (Camp séparé de Paris)

PERMIS DE SÉJOUR EN ÉTRANGER

M^r

Fabian Lloyd

né à

Lausanne

de nationalité

suissesse

s'est présenté le

28 août 1914

pour faire la déclaration de son nom et de son identité.



Permis de séjour délivré à Paris, en août 1914. Le lieu de naissance est erroné, Fabian Lloyd étant né à Lausanne (doc. F. Benedict).

MAINTENANT

Numéro 6

Dépôt Principal : GALERIES de L'ODÉON

7 lire dans un an

Les Éricots

*Atmosphériques de la Morte de
Gouleur à Tahiti*

Poésie

itement,
et de le
es yeux,
je ne
re, qu'à
atazouin
son air
prenait
ait sem-
t que je

avec ma
Améri-
Il avait
re allât
nitive-

1 mange

What a spoof and exactly the kind of spoof Mina Loy will offer us in her satires of conversation among the “cultured” groups at Mabel Dodge’s Villa Curonia in Acetri, just outside of Florence or at the Arensbergs in Manhattan:

It is essential to be American, or at least to look like you are one, which is exactly the same thing. ...In America, you are American only if you come from the United States, just as in France no one would reasonably think of themselves as French unless they came from Paris.⁹

And his way of ending the piece is remarkably like Mina Loy’s way of ending one of her conversational spoofs: “Will you kindly shut up when I am talking” pointing out as she speaks, that she is speaking, and in Cravan, getting to the end of the talk and himself the auto reference

being the point in both case, as a typical phrase of the piece concludes it:

Of late, it has become extremely fashionable to pass oneself off as a Negro.

I would happily hold forth on this subject, but I fear to exhaust your patience – and myself. ¹⁰

It is especially the “NOTES” in the Magazine *Maintenant* which manifest his brilliance in their all-overness about signatures and places and languages and dreams and names and epochs and prose poetry and slams. This typical phrase is characteristic of his writing these energetic sallies: “energy -- concerning the dust of emperors, I have had it in my eyes—“ ¹¹ So in the reader’s eyes, energy is provoked immediately...

NOTES

(in *Maintenant*, translated by Terry Hale)¹²

*Had I known Latin at eighteen, I
would have been Emperor – Which is
more nefarious: the climate of the Congo
or genius?—*

...

*...for a moment I thought of signing
this Arthur the First--*

...

*I have dreamed of being great
enough to found and fashion a republic all
to. Myself*

*...I have twenty countries in my
memory and I drag the colours of a
hundred cities in my soul--*

...

*I fight for breath equally (also) grit –
my heart, break into a gallop--*

...

*Honest, I know myself for the
creature and thief that I am – My heart,
break into a gallop, I will be a millionaire
– I wake a Londoner and go to bed an
Asiatic – Londoner, monocle – furore and
fury -- O you who have known me, follow
me into life – The wind excites me – I am
always nervous--*

...

I have also been the poet of destinies

—

..

*My art which is the most difficult
because I adore it and I shit on it --*

..

*I am perhaps the king of failures
because I'm certainly the king of
something—*

..

--It is me, your Cravan

Wind

*I feel the bloom of my youth and
come fresh-faced*

*To admire America and its new
cycle-racing tracks*

*My noble nature –astride a
bicycle –*

...

*I am everything any every
inundation – after crying able to tear up
my tears – I need a tremendous spree of
debauchery – I am the child of my epoch –
organism—*

*I am what I am: the baby of an
epoch. My heart shaken like a bottle – to
pass with the utmost speed from
enthusiasm to the most compete
demoralization –*

*I am the beautiful Flora, Laurent de
Médicis*

...

*I am Musset, Beethoven, the one who
pulled the job in. the rue des Reculettes –*

..

*Remember that my weight has often
been my despair –*

...

*If I have a genius it is an exclusively
humorous one, and I indisputably have a
genius, and affirm that one often sees
genius (the highest faculty to which man
may attain according to the dictionary)
that cannot be conceived of!—God, what
an imbecile!—*

...

*And my weight is subject to
tremendous fluctuation, my friends will tell*

*you as much, my fleshy face becoming
drawn in a matter of hours –*

...

*I feel reborn to a life of lies – to set
my body. To music—to stuff my boxing-
gloves with women’s earrings --- God is
barking, we should open the door—*

..

I am a caressing madman--

Yes indeed! he wanted to be all-encompassing and that he was. What a madman, and what a grabbag of notes caravanning after each other, so that the breathless reader can only tag along. Cravan was a genuine genius. “I am a caressing madman” – perfectly put. Even just taking any page of his Notes to look at reveals much of his sort of joyous everywhichwayness of taking all things at the same level, the remembrance (“his memories dilated by beer” and his girth :

“his weight is subject to tremendous fluctuation,” but always quite weighty, so that he is impelled to laugh at someone who hasn’t changed his weight in ten years.. much makes him laugh and blush! how impressive he is, being both the man of wit fighting in his night-shirt, and:

I feel reborn to a life of lies – to set my body to music – to stuff my boxing-gloves with women’s earrings__

God is barking, we should open the door

Of course, these were Mina’s earrings he stuffed into his boxing-gloves! This fits right along with Man Ray’s substituting his thermometer to dangle down at great length, for her earrings—all is humour in this crucial moment. I love his pointing out the sceptic and the romantic in himself. For whom does he not take himself, being everyone, and at every moment, he takes himself for others:” I am

the beautiful Flora, *Laurent* de Médicis, and also Musset, Beethoven...”. Strangely, it does not surprise us to find him as others -- goodness knows, he was already in his own naming of himself many persons, and, unsurprisingly also, Mina Loy was often changing her name, the beginning and the end. They so suited each other

The refrains are as moving as they feel genuine: “my heart, break into a gallop...My heart, break into a gallop” – the pace of the thing is extraordinary and the sweep of the thing no less so. The Londoner becomes the Asiatic, “your Cravan” becomes the all: “I am everything” and then the white space after that, to give the reader, and the speaker, time to fill that gap with anything we choose and he chooses. This is the kind of openness that Futurism was wanting, that Mina was always ready for, and I see it as just about the most crucial element of their being together: nothing was preordained,

neither their getting together nor their wanderings, impoverished, through Mexico, and certainly not her setting off alone, carrying his child, nor his mysterious disappearance at sea. This was openness gone wild.

The king of something, surely and perhaps of everything. The self-mockery (“God, what an imbecile!”) is the other side, is as instantly recognizable as the self inconceivably lofty, despite the weight of the thing (“Remember that my weight has often been my despair”), and nevertheless, this is the body he sets to music. This music, even now we hear, avidly, in all its brilliant notes.

Seen From Another Source¹³

Mina Loy's "mystic Colossus" assumed this name on arriving in Paris in 1909, far before he

encountered Mina. Mystic because peculiar in all ways, enigmatic beyond belief, about whose birth and death there remain hanging many details. He called himself by multitudinous names, including "the world's shortest-haired poet" and called others by insulting names, including Apollinaire ("the Jew Apollinaire") who was, of course, in a way Jewish) Marie Laurencin ("Art is not a little pose in front of the mirror"). More enticing still, this P.S. to a piece about the Salon des Indépendants: "Being unable to defend myself against the critics who have hypocritically insinuated that I was related either to Apollinaire or to Marinetti, I hereby warn them that, if they repeat this, I shall twist their private parts." ¹⁴

Breton and Cravan

André Breton, an impassioned admirer of Cravan, insisted to Jacques Doucet, whose literary counselor he was, that he purchase for his library all five numbers of *Maintenant*, adding that Jacques Vaché, whose War Letters he had already persuaded Doucet to buy, found the magazine highly entertaining. Georges Sebbag, in a piece labeled "Arthur Cravan, the Nephew of Oscar Wilde," compares Jacques Vaché (who had, like Cravan, many names) to Jacques in Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste et son maître* and compares Rameau's Nephew (in Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*) to Cravan, Oscar Wilde's

nephew, who recounts a visit (obviously, a fake visit) of the celebrated Wilde to himself, Arthur Cravan. It is convincing, as is the threesome Sebbag puts on stage: if bringing them all to the same café de la Régence on the corner of rue St. Honoré and the Place du Palais-Royal, the very same café where Nadja (Delcourt) is meant to meet Breton, who got the wrong cafe.

Many meetings going on here, at great length, with long citations of Cravan's text, in the fine translation by .."I have lived in so many different milieux" and what Sebbag quite rightly calls Cravan's "Philosophical theatre of the multiple"¹⁵. Thinking of all the aliases we have seen, here Sebbag reminding himself and us that "You have to "let yourself love all that you

love/Accept yourself whole." ¹⁶ The multiple personality now includes Arthur Rimbaud, and at this point, as at all the other points, nothing surprises us about all this.

Legends and Lasting

Least of all the fact that those of us who have read and read texts by and about Arthur Cravan are exhausted with the effort, rather like being in the boxing rings all those times when either, as in France, his assailants fall sick or don't show, or in Barcelona and other Spanish points, he is soon defeated, we fall exhausted and are tempted to say: see which of his exploits strike you as most fascinating -- as they almost all are -- and let yourself be captivated in your own multiple personalities. He provokes when he can, which is almost always: "If I write, it is to annoy my peers, to make people talk about

me, and to try to make a name for myself."¹⁷

What never fails to amuse, if we have the kind of involvement in *logopoeia* that Pound ascribed to Mina Loy, we might find some night-fatal attraction to Cravan's sayings, in relation to his "Visit to André Gide" (whose Lafcadio he inspired, see *Les Aventures de Lafcadio* or *Les Caves du Vatican* (The Vatican Cellars), such as "it might be said that I have the morals of an Androgyne. Will it be said?"¹⁸

Now it has to be said that Arthur Cravan was always fascinated by, haunted by, followed by the idea of suicide, that ultimate act for someone so inclined to staging himself. Mina Loy said of these frequent provocations: "pantomimic atrocities on the spectator's habitual expectations. [...] He worked to maintain his reality by presenting an unreality of himself to the world -- to occupy itself

with -- which he made his spiritual getaway." ¹⁹

As *Erich Weiss* says in the *Pose-Scriptum* to the other texts in the *Guignon* book, he wrote to his mother *Nellie Grandjean* only three months after her arrival in Argentina...²⁰ "About his marriage with *Mina* (in the *Basilica de Guadalupe*) "was a kind of modern one -- 'for one year only.." He finds it strange "that he convinced his wife *Mina Loy* to abandon him in *Mexico* boarding a *Japanese* steamship as a nurse -- heading for *Argentina* -- where they intended to start a new life." Was this an excuse? Legends last. Strange tales last. Apparently, says *Weiss*, a letter apparently exists from *Cravan* to his former lover *Renée*, dated 1919 (!) asking her to join him. In short, no one knows.

It is needless to say, so I shall, that *Cravan* has had an immense influence on others, great *DADA* that he was, from

early on and through the surrealists like Robert Desnos, on down to poets of today.

²¹Robert Desnos in one of the trances he was famous for, declaimed : "Cravan bounds along the shore, his tie trailing in the wind" and then sketched a few signs marked "The death of Cravan."²² Breton, in admiration, says of him: "He managed, I believe, to be a deserter in five or six countries. As you can see, he was a curious man whose legend may well. last. He disappeared a few years ago, trying to cross the Gulf of Mexico single-handed, on a stormy day, in a very frail boat." Clearly this legend appealed to Breton, who gives him a high rank in the Anthology of Black Humour. ²³ He made a mark on Guy Debord and the Situationists, on Joseph Beuys, on Chris Burden, and, of course, his pal Marcel Duchamp", who said: "I knew him well and only Death can be the reason of Arthur's disappearance."

¹ Arthur Cravan, *Oeuvres: Poèmes, Articles, Lettres* (Paris, 1987.)

² In the *London Review of Books*, “Diverted Traffic: a newish almost-daily newsletter from the LRB,” March 18, 2020. Here we read Charles Nicholl on the disappearance of Arthur Cravan. I think it portentous of the interest we might now pay to Cravan that this appears as the very

first Diverted Traffic: not that he is diverting, but that, when you read about him, you feel it was worth being diverted, whatever you might have been trafficking in.

³ The result was my *Snail Time*: with *Tempi da lumaca*, translation by Daniela Daniele, *Duchamperie* (1977-2018), by Pablo Echaurren, *Duchamperies* (1977-2018) translation by Huw Evans (Rome, 2018).

⁴ Félix Fénéon, Archinard's dealer and Cravan's friend, had paintings shown in the pages of Emmanuel Guignon's *Arthur Cravan Maintenant* (Museo Picasso, Barcelona, 2017)., pp. 87-99, in the article of Jean-Paul Morel, "Archinard, una mistificazione" pp. 65-101.

⁵ *4 Dada Suicides: Arthur Cravan, Jacques Rigaut, Julien Torma, Jacques Vaché*

(Atlas Anti-Classic 2, London, 2005), 78.

⁶ As Kwame Appiah points out in the *New York Times Magazine* of March 22, 2020, the poet John Hollander enjoyed pointing out that this term was literally “before-afterly” I love it and loved him.

⁷ *4 Dada Suicides: Arthur Cravan, Jacques Rigaut, Julien Torma, Jacques Vaché* (Atlas Anti-Classic 2, London, 2005), 23.

⁸ *Loc. Cit.*

⁹ *Op cit.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Op cit.*, 32.

¹¹ *Maintenant*, Eric C. Losfeld Paris , 1957, p. 51.

¹² Terry Hale's translation. of Arthur Cravan's Notes from *Maintenant*, from Mary Ann Caws.,ed. , *Surrealist Painters*

and Poets: An Anthology (Boston, 2001), pp. 169-173.

¹³ All material from Emmanuel Guignon, ed. *„Arthur Cravan MAINTENANT? (texts of Laurence Madeline, Jean-Paul Morel, Aitor Qjuiney, Georges Sebbag, and Erich Weiss.) (Museu Picasso, Barcelona, 2018).*

¹⁴ Emmanuel Guignon, ed. *„Arthur Cravan MAINTENANT? (texts of Laurence Madeline, Jean-Paul Morel, Aitor Qjuiney, Georges Sebbag, and Erich Weiss.) (Museu Picasso, Barcelona, 2018), Sebbag, p. 266.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁶ The translations of Cravan's texts are by Terry Hale : "To Be or Not To Be American," and the Notes are all by Terry Hale; the translation of "Whistle" is my own.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 269.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

²⁰ *Loc.cit.*

²¹ A full biography to be referred to is that of Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan, una biografia*. (Barcelona, 1993).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 276.