

BLOODAXE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETS: 2

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# RENÉ CHAR

## The Dawn Breakers



## Les Matinaux

Edited & translated by  
MICHAEL WORTON

BILINGUAL EDITION

Throughout the twentieth century, France has been a dominant force in the development of European culture. It has made essential contributions and advances not just in literature but in all the arts, from the novel to film and philosophy; in drama (Theatre of the Absurd), art (Cubism and Surrealism) and literary theory (Structuralism and Post-Structuralism). These very different art forms and intellectual modes find a dynamic meeting-point in post-war French poetry.

Some French poets are absorbed by the latest developments in philosophy or psychoanalysis. Others explore relations between poetry and painting, between the written word and the visual image. There are some whose poetry is rooted in Catholicism, and others who have remained faithful to Surrealism, and whose poetry is bound to a life of action or political commitment.

Because it shows contemporary French poetry in a broader context, this new series will appeal both to poetry readers and to anyone with an interest in French culture and intellectual life. The books themselves also provide an imaginative and exciting approach to French poets which makes them ideal study texts for schools, colleges and universities.

Each volume is a single, unabridged collection of poems presented in a parallel-text format, with the French text facing an English verse translation by a distinguished expert or poet-translator. The editor of each book is an authority on the particular writer, and in each case the editor's introduction presents not only a critical appreciation of the work and its place in the author's output but also a comprehensive account of its social, intellectual and cultural background.

The series itself has been planned in such a way that the individual volumes will build up into a stimulating and informative introduction to contemporary French poetry, giving readers both an intimate experience of how French poets think and write, and a working overview of what makes poetry important in France. It is launched with three works by some of the best-known French poets of the post-war period: Yves Bonnefoy, René Char and Henri Michaux.

## BLOODAXE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETS

Series Editors: Timothy Mathews & Michael Worton

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Timothy Mathews is Fellow in French at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He has published *Reading Apollinaire: Theories of Poetic Language* (Manchester University Press, 1987), and is now writing a book for Cambridge University Press on alienation in modern French literature and painting. The first volume in the Bloodaxe Contemporary French Poets series, *On the Motion and Impossibility of Dawn* by Yves Bonnefoy, has an introduction by Timothy Mathews.

Michael Worton is Senior Lecturer in French at University College London. He has published extensively on contemporary French writers, co-edited *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester University Press, 1990), and is now writing books on Samuel Beckett and Michel Tournier. The second volume in the Bloodaxe Contemporary French Poets series, *The Dawn Breakers* by René Char, is introduced and translated by Michael Worton.

For further details of the Bloodaxe Contemporary French Poets series, please see pages 157-58 of this book.

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# RENÉ CHAR

The Dawn Breakers

*Les Matinaux*

Translated & introduced by  
MICHAEL WORTON



BLOODAXE BOOKS

BLOODAXE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETS: 2

René Char: *The Dawn Breakers*

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## GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

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The *Blondaxe Contemporary French Poets* series aims to bring a broad range of post-war French poetry to as wide an English-speaking readership as possible, and it has specific features which are designed to further this aim.

First of all, each volume is devoted to a complete, unabridged work by a poet. This is designed to maintain the coherence of what a poet is trying to achieve in publishing a book of poems. We hope that in this way, the particular sense of a poet working within language will be highlighted. Secondly, each work appears in parallel translation. Finally, each work is prefaced by a substantial essay which gives a critical appreciation of the book of poetry, of its place in its author's work, as well as an account of its social and intellectual context.

In each case, this essay is written by an established critic with a love of French poetry. It aims not only to be informative, but also to respond in a lively and distinctive way to the pleasures and challenges of reading each poet. Similarly, the translators, often poets in their own right, adopt a range of different approaches, and in every case they seek out an English that gives voice to the uniqueness of the French poems.

Each translation in the series is not just faithful to the original, but aims to recreate the poet's voice or its nearest equivalent in another language: each is a translation from French poetry into English poetry. Each essay seeks to make its own statement about how and why we read poetry and think poetry. The work of each poet dovetails with others in the series to produce a living illustration of the importance of poetry in contemporary French culture.

## INTRODUCTION

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René Char (1907-88) is often described as a poet of nostalgia who is essentially concerned with his own childhood in Provence and with the pre-industrial and pre-nuclear world. His poems have also often been described as hermetic, as "difficult" or "intellectual". Internationally recognised as one of the most important French poets since the Surrealists, perhaps even since Paul Valéry, he is respected as a poet-philosopher but he has never become a popular poet. This says much about what many modern, urban readers expect from contemporary poetry: they want to encounter both familiar, "relevant" images and a language which corresponds to what they know and speak, hence the commercial success of such different poets as Prévert, Brel, Betjeman and Larkin.

Char does not seek to please his readers but to make them more aware of their own lives, and this he does by capturing and crystallising brief moments of existence which may aid readers to understand their own experiences. However, his imagery is drawn from a direct and sustained contact with Nature in Provence, a region which most of his readers will not know at all or will know only as tourists rushing from one celebrated site to another. And yet when we discover in the poetry reference to Vaucluse villages or sites such as Le Thor, Maussane, Thouzou, Les Dentelles de Montmirail, the Fontaine de Vaucluse, these names do not exclude us but resonate in a magical way – and even those who know the Vaucluse well must recognise that the poet has transformed a specific, physical geography into a universal, mythic geography. Char's sense of place is both acute and emotional: the topography of this land can be verified and has an intense physical presence but, more importantly, it is a world traversed by the enigmatic *Transparents* or *Clear-seeing Ones* who remind us of a time when our relationship with Nature was intimate, a world inhabited by the *Matinaux* or *Dawn Breakers* who live in and between night and day. Like Michaux's poetry, Char's work has an extraordinary visual force, an 'evidence'. But whereas Michaux creates imaginary countries in order to comment on the nature of reality, Char chooses to present his native region in order to reveal the truth that lies within reality.

Throughout his life, from his lonely childhood days until his last years when he chose to lead a secluded life near his birth-place Isle-sur-Sorgue and far from the literary and political feuds

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of Paris, Char found his inspiration in his long walks through the Vaucluse countryside and in his quiet, questioning observation of plants, animals, birds, rivers and meteorological changes. Many of his finest poems result from his determination to see fully in order to understand, to see in solitude in order to offer others the possibility of finding their own vision: for him, seeing authentically is a necessary first step towards the establishment of a sense of what I shall for the moment call 'beings-in-the-world'.

However, in Char's poetry Nature is not a mere pretext for some late-coming Romantic poetry. When Char looks at flowers, he uses his vision in a different way than did Wordsworth coming upon his 'crowd of host of golden daffodils'. When he writes of the river Sorgue which rises at the Fontaine de Vaucluse and runs through his home town, he is not imitating Petrarch who, fascinated by the isolated and enclosed Fontaine de Vaucluse, composed there many of his poems on Laura. Nor is he following Lamartine who gazed in narcissistic melancholy on his celebrated lake. The natural world around him provides an excuse for projection of his own moods and anxieties or for pathetic fallacy. Rather, he seeks to see fully, to *rescue* the natural world and thence to discover oneness in difference always maintained as difference.

The focusing on individual objects is a feature of much modern French poetry. Yves Bonnefoy, for example, repeatedly portrays a salamander in order to meditate on presence and absence, and Francis Ponge writes sequences of poems on a pebble or a block of soap in order to offer a post-Cubist image of their quiddity or 'thingness'. Char's procedure is somewhat different – he seeks to show that no single object, be it animate or inanimate, can or should be perceived and interpreted in isolation but must be recognised as part of some vaster plan. For instance, in 'Complainte du lézard amoureux'/'Lament of a lovesick lizard' in *Les Aubeurs/The Dawn Breakers*, the lizard is presented as a commentator, as a mediator who 'sees everything from his low wall' and can therefore 'tell the secrets of the earth'. For Char it is essential that we realise that all things, all beings have an autonomous existence and also function as revelatory images. His readers may well live in an environment in which there are no lizards or vipers, no crickets or cicadas, no Mistral winds, no high jagged mountains, no saxifrage or lavender, but the images hit home because they are offered as examples, as *paradigms*. Char should not be seen as a regional poet, but as a poet-thinker who universalises what he knows and sees personally, as a 'tragic optimist' who seeks to remind us that the past is always

with and within us. In *La parole en archipel/The Word as Archipelago* (1962), there is a sequence of four poems inspired by the prehistoric Lascaux cave-paintings. Each text refers us to an individual painting, yet the poetic act consists not in giving a verbal equivalent but in offering an interpretation of past images that we need to think about if we are to avoid simply admiring them as tourists. When writing of the painting of a young horse, Char marries his memory of this one image to references to African cults of the White Woman (a goddess of maternity) and to Georges de la Tour's paintings of Mary Magdalene (a symbol of repentance, death and hope). The Lascaux painting is evoked but, more importantly, it is made the site of interpretation and appropriation. And the past, like the specific location of the Vaucluse, is shown to be both specific in its otherness or distance and universal in its present emotional and metaphysical value for us.

All of Char's poems articulate the experiences of a man confronting the physical world in a state of heightened emotion, be it as a lover, as a Resistance fighter, as a walker through the Provençal landscape, as a 'Green' militant against nuclear power stations and the industrial polluting of rivers, as a spectator of paintings or as a reader of past writings. In many ways Char's poetic position is very close to that of the Thirties poet and critic Christopher Caudwell who stated that 'poetry is an adaptation to external reality. It is an emotional attitude to the world'. All Char's poems are highly personal (in *Fureur et mystère/Fury and Mystery*, 1948, he affirms that 'The poem is always married to someone'), but they never seek to impose a purely subjective truth. Rather, they use language and images to urge readers into a sense of wonderment at, and a questioning of, the essence of existence.

Char's work should not, however, be seen as ontological or metaphysical in the sense that only scholars or philosophers can understand it. He himself said in an interview in 1948: 'I have my own personal critic. He's a peacher. When I've written something, I read it to him, and I can't help but laugh when people say that I'm hermetic, because he immediately understands, and says "Yes, you've got that right" or "You should change that word, and this one".' Another revelatory anecdote relates to Char's work in the Resistance. An officer sent from de Gaulle's headquarters in Algiers found it difficult to follow the imagistic language of Char's men. The poet explained that while slang is merely picturesque, the language shared by the Provençal Resistance fighters was metaphorical because of their intimate, direct contact with Nature, and he added

that he used images in his dealings with them because 'when an image once strikes home, it is never ever forgotten'.

Char's poetry is extraordinarily visual even, as I say, for those who have never climbed the Provençal mountains or walked along the River Sorgue, but it also testifies to an almost mystical belief in the power of language. Words are our companions, our supports and our adversaries as we live our our lives, so we must be careful with them: as Char said in 1968, 'My love of words is so great that I cannot bear to squander them.' Char's poems are characterised by crispness and tension, but the individual terms employed are neither crisp nor fixed: each poem is like a limpid pool into which words have been dropped like pebbles, radiating out circles of connotations which never turn completely to rest: in this poetry, words do not have single denotational meanings nor even "mere" ambiguity; they have etymological and connotational resonances and ultimately function as *echoes* of the lost language of a violent harmony.

For Char, poetry should not be categorical or didactic; it should lead readers to a state of lucidity in which they can perceive for themselves the meaning of the contradictions which fill and define the world. Yet no poet has full control over organised language and even less over individual words – which will always mean something different to different readers each of whom brings to their readings a personal (and often anxious) response to terms such as 'father', 'mother', 'love', and 'home'. Char is aware of this phenomenon, which, in a sense, is at the heart of his poetic project.

In his first collection *Les cloches sur le cœur/ Bells on the heart* (1928), he used an imagery reminiscent of that of earlier French poets such as Laforgue and Apollinaire, an urban imagery of taxis, show-girls and electricity, but he later repudiated this volume and bought up and destroyed most of the 153 copies. While more than 50 years later the poet was to incorporate and rewrite fragments from this volume in some of his last works, this act of self-censorship, of what one might call poetic self-mutilation, is important for an understanding of Char's development. As he himself recognised, this volume is the work of a poet who is in search of his own voice – and who has not yet liberated himself from the influence of near-contemporaries or from the demands of formal poetic structures. Furthermore many of the texts are haunted, even scarred by his anguish at the deaths of his father and grandmother. They speak of a very private universe, of a childhood that could not be properly incorporated into his poetry until he had exorcised the ghosts

and found a voice which was both individual and universal. Hence the repudiation of the volume.

The poems in *Les cloches sur le cœur/Bells on the heart* were written between 1922 and 1926, the year in which Paul Éluard published *Capitale de la douleur/Capital of suffering*. Char's discovery of this volume was to be decisive for his poetic career. He found there a contemporary voice which married the personal and the universal, the simple and the complicated, violence and harmony, love and disappointment (even anger). It was a book that ceased to look to the past for models and inspired Char to explore new ways of writing. In 1929 and at his own expense he published *Arsenal/Arsenal*, a collection which heralds the true Charrian voice. Here there is much violence but most of the images are now drawn from Nature and the poet has discovered the complex virtue of simplicity, as in this poem:

L'Amour  
Être  
Le premier vent

L'ave  
Être  
The first to come along

Char sent a copy of *Arsenal* to Éluard who immediately went to L'Isle-sur-Sorgue to meet the young poet and to invite him to Paris to meet other Surrealists such as Breton and Aragon. Char consequently joined the Surrealist group at the same time as Dalí and Buñuel and in 1930 published *Ralentir travaux/Slow down men at work*, a text written collectively with Éluard and Breton. For the next five years he was an important member of the group, co-signing many tracts and open letters. More importantly, he began to read such major Surrealist precursors as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, the pre-Socratic philosophers and the great alchemists. He also engaged actively, and occasionally belligerently – with his fists – in their political battles. These were times of friendship (notably with Éluard, a surrogate elder brother), times of reading and self-examination, but Char was already more concerned with poetry as a way of dealing with the world than with Parisian and international quarrels about details of political ideology. During his membership of the Surrealist group, he above all explored different ways of being free, yet he could never fully accept that the unconscious should be privileged over the conscious, as the Surrealists as a whole did. The most important lesson that Char learned from Surrealism was



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that poetry can and must violate the comfortable rules of society and syntax. A consequence of this is that aggression can be poetised in such a way that neither subject nor object is destroyed. Both are maintained in a state of creative, prospective suffering. Formal logic has no place in this thinking; what is privileged is *lived* experience and an often aggressive engagement with the Other, by which I mean anything outside of himself. While Char is primarily committed to writing about the Other, his poems testify to an aggression toward the object, be it an image or a poem he has created, a woman he loves, the reader, the text, language generally – or even himself. His poetry is profoundly sadomasochistic in its play with aggression and passivity. But he seeks not to destroy either subject or object but to maintain both in a state of suffering and heightened awareness. Char's exploration and presentation of the subject-object relationship as an interaction, as a *dialogue*, distinguishes him from the other Surrealists whose work is often generated by narcissism, by an obsessive need to define and describe everything in terms of their own fantasies and political positions. Char rejects this (willed) identification of subject and object which characterises most Surrealist poetry, especially that of André Breton, preferring to articulate his own sense of aggression in order to establish a new sense of (waiting) harmony. Even in his love poems where he inevitably speaks of himself, we find an *exposure* rather than a *retracted* narcissism, that is to say he expresses his own deeply personal emotions in order to engage fully with some absolutely *other* – who is always both the beloved and the unknown reader.

Much later, in *À une sérénité crispée / Towards a tense serenity* (1952), he explicitly confronted the problem of narcissism, writing: 'You should have drunk of the water, Narcissus, and not looked at yourself'. Narcissus, as mythic figure and as psychic structure, is finally perceived as culpable. By preferring his self-image to the nourishing and ever-changing transparency of the water, he has risked more than narcissistic imprisonment: he has denied freedom and even immortality both to the self and to the Other. In his love poem 'Lettre amoureuse' (1953, definitive version 1964), Char most fully reveals how he has learned to incorporate images of violence and fantasies of death and resurrection into a tender but brutally honest text. This long poem warns against the dual temptations of idealisation and aggressiveness and proposes that reflection must be more than a narcissistic gazing at the self: we must both see our uniqueness and allow the world and other people to become part of ourselves and of our self-images.

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All of Char's later poetry bears the traces of his contact with the Surrealist group, notably in his creation of juxtapositional images, but even during his period of allegiance to Surrealism he was seeking to write with moral seriousness and with simplicity (he rarely indulged in the linguistic fireworks-displays dear to Breton, Desnos and Queneau). Furthermore he always insisted on the creative control of the conscious: all of his poetry is firmly tied to the world and communicates a commitment to lucidity as the touchstone of existence. This is what led to his official break with the movement in December 1935 when he wrote in a public letter that 'Surrealism has committed itself to a course which is bound to lead it to the Retirement Home for Belles-Lettres and Violence'. Angry, cruel words – generated by his disappointment with colleagues who had in his view betrayed the ideal of fraternity and poetry. Although Char was reluctant to speak about his Surrealist period, whenever he did he would express his irritation with those who 'did in fact rather bore me'. But at the same time he would also insist on the importance of the lessons he had learned and especially the life-long friendships he had formed, notably with Éluard, Braque and Picasso.

In 1936, history – both social and personal – coincided with a literature of violence when the Spanish Civil War broke out and the poet contracted an acute case of septicaemia which almost led to his death. His rage against the senseless killing of children led to *Placard pour un chemin des écoliers/Sign towards the long way round* (1937) in which he re-enacts his own childhood, now perceived in the context both of the Spanish child-victims and of his narrow escape from death. Yet already here we find his refusal to write poems which are too closely tied to individual events: for Char, if we are to be fully human, we must constantly engage in acts of resistance but we must also look beyond the specific aspects of individual events and atrocities in order to perceive their universality. Only then can we realise that oppression is always with us. In 1952 he wrote, 'Our most insidious enemy is what is happening today', by which he means that the defeat of a Hitler, a Franco or a Saddam Hussein is never enough: there will always be other – less obvious – oppressors, such as the State, the Church, even the education system. So, he insists, we must never at any moment allow ourselves to relax into thinking that human liberty has been assured once and for all.

The 1930s were a crucial decade in Char's moral, political and poetic development. He rejected Surrealism and what he called its 'clever but artificial' obsession with alchemy and Rimbaud's notion

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of verbal alchemy (which for some Surrealists merely meant language-games). He came close to death and was outraged by the atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War. Later, he made a personal discovery of the horror of the Nazi persecution of Jews and 'communists': his first wife, Georgette Goldstein, was a Jewess and he was officially declared to be a Communist in 1941. These various factors lead him to join the Resistance forces and, known as 'le capitaine Alexandre', he initially masterminded sabotage attacks on the occupying Italian army and against the Nazis and then took charge of the SAP (Section Atterrissage Parachutage/landing-parachuting organisation) in Southern France. During his struggle against the occupying forces, he continued to write, although he did not show to his comrades his brief, passionate notes – which he agreed to publish only after the war. These *Feuillets d'Hypnos/Leaves of Hypnos* (1946) are a precious historical, moral as well as poetic document. They say much about how Resistance activity aided men to find themselves, about how deaths can be witnessed impotently, from a distance, and yet ultimately be perceived as a means of understanding life and what it should be. Many of these texts blaze with rage, especially when Char talks of intimate friends who were executed or sent to concentration camps and when he writes of his angry refusal of any and every tyranny. Yet scattered throughout these 237 notes are many highly moral, self-controlling, almost religious exhortations to go beyond rage, fury and hatred in order to continue effectively the struggle against oppression and to prepare for the future creation of a better world. In this respect, it is important to note that after the Liberation Char spent much time helping to establish dossiers which proved that his Resistance comrades had been true 'maquisards', but that he refused to participate in the shameful witch-hunt of alleged collaborators which he considered to be nothing more than 'a copy of what our enemy did when it was in power'. 'We must triumph over our rage and our disgust...' he wrote, 'in order to make both our actions and our morality nobler and more far-reaching.'

However, the demands of warfare and leading a Resistance group led Char to make difficult decisions which were to haunt him for the rest of his life. In 1946, he wrote a darkly mysterious poem 'L'extravagant'/'The act of madness', published in *Le poème pulvérisé/The pulverised poem* (1947), which ends with the statement that 'Spring does not exist'. Of all his texts, this was the one which for years he refused to discuss. 'You are forbidden to touch this poem – it's mine and mine alone,' he stormed at one critic and

friend when pressed for an explanation. This refusal is a surprise when one remembers the poet's usual insistence that no text 'belongs' to its author once it is published. But in this case his reasons were understandable in that the poem does not speak of an extravagant or mad person but of an excessive act. In 1983 he finally explained to Paul Veyne that 'l'extravagant'/'The act of madness' was born out of his anguished decision to execute two young traitors, one of whom had betrayed forty-five of his comrades to the Gestapo who then shot them; the other was a dangerous collaborator. While Char has said that individual lives cannot have the same value in wartime as they do in peacetime, he was haunted by these executions, especially in the immediate post-war years when he was nauseated by the way in which both the Right and the Left in France were exploiting the Liberation. The actual poem makes no explicit reference to the executions, but this very silence is revelatory: it reminds us that poetry must always be about transformation – whatever details we may glean of its genesis, the text itself should remain as a trace of lived experience and, more importantly, as a metamorphosis of that experience.

Through his contact with the Surrealists, Char had discovered the communicational possibilities of a language which bypassed the rational, the conscious, the socially-determined; his experiences in the Resistance, when revolt had to be expressed in deeds rather than in words, taught him to beware of the temptation of merely playing with language. In his war notebooks he repeatedly articulates his awareness that words – and even poetry – become marginal when events demand active commitment, yet he also could not but continue to write, in secret, when not engaged in Resistance work. As he says in a revelatory note: 'I write briefly. I cannot be absent for any length of time. Saying all I wanted to say would become obsessive. The adoration of the shepherds no longer makes any sense for our planet.' By this he means that we cannot today permit ourselves either to indulge in self-centred expression or to be naïve, passive worshippers at any shrine: we need to be aggressive and even violent. So the problem of the place of poetry in the modern world was posed for him in a much more urgent way than for Holderlin or even for Heidegger. In moments of danger, actions must take precedence over words, he recognises – but only words can both maintain and interrogate the memory of these events in and for future years.

All of Char's later work is shaped by his war-time experiences with language and silence, but it is also marked and enriched by

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an event which gave an anxious reality to the Surrealists' mystical, utopian view of language as magical. During his Resistance activity the code-word for one of the parachute drops was 'La bibliothèque est en feu' (The library is on fire). One of the containers exploded and set fire to the forest, illuminating the horizon, with the result that Char's group only just escaped with the other containers before the Gestapo arrived. Char's reaction was immediate: he contacted London to demand that the code be changed because 'I believe in the magic and in the authority of words' — since paper is made from wood, the code fatally determined that the forest should burn. Whatever we may individually wonder about such beliefs in the prophetic power of language, it is certain that Char was convinced that words can have a direct effect on the material world. This conviction can be traced back beyond his Surrealist period to the folklore of his childhood. For instance, he was familiar with the Provençal custom of setting out a glass of water in order to placate the 'returning spirits' and stated that he believed in ghosts even though he had never actually seen one. In both his Surrealist and his post-war periods, he wrote texts which tell of encounters which appear to be supernatural. This belief in a world beyond the physically verifiable links Char to pre-Christian thinking. His opposition to all religions that name their gods arose out of a deep mistrust of organised Christianity yet he nonetheless always retained a sense of the real possibility of transcendence. He might insist that 'It is fatal to abolish distance. The gods die only when they live amongst us'; yet his work is haunted by references to Christian figures and to Provençal and Classical mythologies. The latter may be familiar but for many readers the Provençal allusions are problematic.

One example from *Les Maitrains* is the use of *calendes* in 'Fête des arbres et du chasseur'/'Celebration of the trees and the hunter'. For many years I assumed that this referred to the Calends, the first day of any month in the Roman calendar and consequently I had problems understanding the full significance of the verse. French dictionaries and encyclopaedias were of no help, and none of the French writers I consulted could shed any light: I was left puzzling over why Char had used the term. Then, purely by chance, when chatting one day with a friend in Avignon, I discovered that in Provençal *calendes* means New Year (and in popular folklore is associated with the return of the dead). The meaning of the verse was suddenly clear, but this discovery was more than just a problem solved. It helped me to understand that when Char uses unfamiliar

or archaic words, he does not intend to confuse or deter his readers. Rather he is reminding us that words mean different things in different contexts and that they often have a hidden history. Convinced that we increasingly need today to learn from the past which is all too swiftly disappearing from our ken, Char offers us enigmas to solve – in order to oblige us to construct a new and personal sense of presence.

## Childhood: Solitude and Anger

*The Child is father of the Man*  
WORDSWORTH

*Touch me with noble anger*  
SHAKESPEARE (*KING LEAR*)

The child as a figure of innocence and wonderment haunts much European literature and is often associated with the notion of the privileged moment – when we both feel intensely and see harmony in the world. In the ‘*La chambre double*’/‘*The Double room*’, Baudelaire defines this dual quality of consciousness as having ‘the sufficient clarity and the delightful obscurity of harmony’. The creative tension described by Baudelaire is close to that proposed by the pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus, Empedocles and Parmenides whom Char admires above all other philosophers, notably for their insistence that true consciousness is about emotion as much as about rational perception. We have all had experiences when the object or scene at which we are gazing seems to separate itself from the daily flow of impressions and becomes intensely clear and important for us. However, these epiphanies or moments of illumination become increasingly rare as we grow older and our lives are dominated by professional concerns. While the Romantic poets may look back nostalgically at childhood, Char’s attitude is essentially forward-looking. In him the past and the present exist in a relationship of complementarity and supplementarity which necessarily includes a straining towards the future. His vision of childhood is also very different from that of Proust who sees and uses the world of his childhood as *non-moi* (not me). For Char, the child ‘sees the man in a simplified light. Therein lies the secret of their inseparability’.

In the privileged moment, the normal subject-object relationship is suspended, as is sequential, “horizontal” time or time-as-

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succession – and Char constantly insists on the importance of “vertical” time, of moments when we are removed from banal reality and experience the world intensely. His favourite image for this is the lightning flash which is both ephemeral and ‘long’, an illumination which lasts. The problem of reality is at the heart of his thinking, and his poetry seeks to merge the mystical impulses of childhood with the rational perceptions of adulthood and modern science. Yet always one senses that for Char these epiphanies are experienced in a state of isolation. Valéry uses the term *absence*, by which he means that the gazing person falls out of a world made of signs or abstract concepts into one made of *significances*. Rilke chooses to speak about *aloneness*, by which he means that in moments of heightened awareness we are cut off from the everyday world and become one with the cosmos. It is through childhood that we are raised above the banality of existence and are, as Rilke says, ‘a place where heart and star are mingled’, but while both Valéry’s and Rilke’s terms have a positive sense, Char, who shares their belief in epiphanies, sees absence and aloneness as also having a negative, destructive quality.

Char’s thinking is certainly inscribed in this tradition which insists on the privileged moment and which associates the child with vision and imagination. He speaks, for instance, of imagination as ‘my child’ and repeatedly affirms that imagination distances itself from everyday reality in order to discover the real – which he defines in terms borrowed from Christianity as ‘being not made’ (*le réel incréé*). However, while the child is an important cultural concept which Char shares with many other writers, his own early lived experiences are the foundation of most of the major themes and indeed techniques of his work.

The youngest of four children, Char was a silent, lonely, sad and often angry boy who found solace in the companionship of the fisherfolk of L’Isle and in his long walks by the River Sorgue during which he had the double sense of being part of Nature and somehow separated from it. For instance, he once wrote that ‘The hawthorn in flower was my first alphabet’. This is a testament to how a child learns experientially by seeing, touching and smelling rather than through school-lessons where language and logic supplant pure images. Yet the hawthorn also plays an important role in both Provençal folklore and Christian iconography: it cannot therefore be just a tree seen by a child on a walk but must function in his mind as a reminder that others have *already* interpreted it for him. For this reason it is important to know that his first

memory was, at the age of three or four, that of the beauty of women – the beauty of his adored eldest sister Julia (who would much later tragically go mad) and that of his Italian nanny. This initial discovery of feminine beauty was decisive, but it brought with it another crucial discovery: everything that is not beautiful (and for him this means most of the world) is disastrous and destructive – many of his most passionate attacks on Nazism are articulated in terms of its ugliness. In other words, beauty is a moral force, a unifying principle which we must constantly seek to re-establish. He closes his war journal thus: 'In the darkness in which we live, there is not one single place for Beauty. Beauty must be everywhere.' Yet beauty reveals itself all too rarely and only in privileged moments, so one must struggle to rediscover and recreate it.

The discovery of beauty (and of its all too frequent absence) was soon followed by his experience of death. The first and most traumatic death was that of his father, the second that of his grandmother. In an interview in 1965, he said: 'When I was a child, death was my cousin. I lost my father in my eleventh year, then my maternal grandmother – the two people who loved and understood me best, and then some others.' His father's death led to financial problems for the family and to the exacerbation of his already difficult relationship with his mother who was 'always good to me, although often clumsy' but who felt that he had to be kept under firm control because he 'was never like other children'. More significantly, though, it left Char with a feeling of the injustice of life and death (his father represented 'equilibrium and justice' for him), and throughout his adult life he would fight against the injustice shown by individuals, by political ideologies and by all institutions of the State.

His elder brother 'persecuted' him from an early age and, when he was ten years old, he was so driven by his feeling of injustice that he persuaded Jean-Pantracé Nougier, one of his L'Isle-sur-Sorgue mentors, to lend him a pistol so that he could kill him. Nougier wisely refused to give him any bullets, so over the next few years Char hardened his fists by punching trees until he could finally knock his brother down (his brother's bullying is the key to 'L'adolescent souffleté'/'The slapped adolescent' in *Les Mots*). This episode is more than just a familiar story of sibling rivalry: it reveals how from an early age Char was convinced of the necessity to hit back, to combat injustice with violence. The importance of the loss of his father cannot be over-estimated, for it altered Char



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