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René Char and the Aphorism

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In that sense, the one-time ally of the surrealists has remained true to André Breton's admonition to lovers: the lost paradises are not the most enchanting ones; paradises loom incessantly in front of us to be stormed. "How can we live without the unknown in front of us?" asks Char. The woman is no mere ornamental adjunct to his life, no pleasant pretext for strings of baroque or "precious" metaphors. Even when transfigured by her lover's desire, she remains concrete, endowed with the power to mediate between him and the pollen of flowers, the crickets in the fields, the springs and the majestic oaks ("Hommage et famine," *FM*). Only rarely has French poetry been as stripped of all adornment, as grave and as fervent as the three brief stanzas which open one of the very few long poems by Char, the evocation of the three Parcae entitled "Les trois soeurs" (The Three Sisters; from *FM*). Mary Ann Caws courageously and felicitously renders these lines as follows (*PRC*, 99):

My love in the blue-beacon dress,  
I kiss the fever of your face  
where the light lies taking its secret joy.

I love and am sobbing. I am alive  
and your heart is this Morning Star  
with the victorious endurance blushing  
before breaking the battle of Constellations.

Distant from you, may my body be the sail  
shunning the wind.<sup>2</sup>

Love is not merely a source of poetic inspiration for Char, nor is it the well from which generations of poets

before him drew passionate lyrics. Rather, it is the image of a dynamic union in which both man and woman partake of a joy that is a rebirth and a symbol of life. His poems are more an homage to that feeling of total fulfillment than they are the expression of one's limited experience. "I am alive" is the exultant cry, to which "your heart is this Morning Star" rings as an echo, the repeated melody thrust across the spaces of time to come.

As the dean of French poets reaches in 1977 his seventieth year, surrounded in his solitude with the admiration of lovers of poetry in many countries, the restrained force of his verse has added new domains to the expression of passion, tenderness and desire. With grave nobleness he has remained steadily true to the definition of poetry which he once offered: "Le poème est l'amour réalisé du désir demeuré désir."

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a short prose poem which has all the luminous, self-contained purity of a painting by Vermeer or Chardin, "L'amoureuse en secret" (Loving in Secret), first included in *Les matinaux* under the title of "Le consentement tacite," Char had written, "She has set the table and brought to perfection what her love scented across from her will speak to softly in a moment. . . ." (*PRC*, 127).

<sup>2</sup> This translation and a few others in this essay are borrowed, as indicated, from the volume *Poems of René Char*, translated and annotated by Mary Ann Caws and Jonathan Griffin, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1976. The reader who can enjoy in French, Italian, Spanish or German the added tenderness and intimacy afforded by the second-person singular and by the corresponding possessive adjective ("ton visage," "hors de toi") will of course deplore the impoverishment suffered by the English language in reducing the several degrees of intimacy to a uniform "you."

## René Char and the Aphorism

By C. A. HACKETT Most dictionary definitions agree that an aphorism is a short pithy statement or maxim. Some specify that *short* means a single sentence and add that the statement should be about a truth, doctrine, principle or precept; others, while not mentioning any particular subject, say that the "essential" should be expressed. The aphorisms of René Char are short, although many are longer than one sentence, and they convey the essential about a variety of subjects; but they express an emotion as well as a truth. They are all *poetic* aphorisms, and they have unique qualities that transcend any attempt at precise description or definition.

The illuminating flash, a brevity that is complex and

dense, a dynamic life-giving power—these are the qualities that characterize all Char's aphorisms. In a special number of the review *L'Herne* (no. 15, 1971) Saint-John Perse paid homage to his younger contemporary declaring: "Char, vous avez forcé l'éclair au nid, et sur l'éclair vous bâtissez." More succinctly, Char affirms, "L'Éclair me dure" (*La bibliothèque est en feu et autres poèmes*, 1957), a striking paradox which is explained by another aphorism: "Si nous habitons un éclair, il est le cœur de l'éternel" (*Le poème pulvérisé*, 1947). In a more extended statement which reflects the duality at the heart of his work, he refers to the double nature of the *éclair*: "Nous sommes ingouvernables. Le seul maître qui nous soit propice, c'est l'Éclair, qui tantôt nous illumine et tantôt nous pourfend" (*La bibli-*

*othèque est en feu*). But as its Greek origin reminds us, *aphorism* implies definition, the existence of limits and boundaries; as, inevitably, it also suggests what lies beyond the boundary line—the limitless and the free. Char himself has said: “Ma brièveté est sans chaînes,” and indeed most of his statements are both “closed” and “open,” and within their exiguous space ambiguities and opposites are held in a state of “tensed serenity.”

From the beginning of his literary career Char seems to have adopted instinctively an aphoristic style, and aphorisms have been an integral part of his poetry from his first volume, *Arsenal* (1929),<sup>1</sup> to *Faire du chemin avec . . .* (1976). In total, they constitute more than half of his work, and some volumes—for example, *À une sérénité crispée* (1951) and *L'âge cassant* (1965)—are composed entirely of sequences of aphorisms. In *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (1946) they mingle with statements of an ethical and practical kind (as is natural in this wartime diary). Sometimes they form a separate section, contrasting with other sections which contain poems in stanza form and *poèmes en prose*, as in the volume *Le poème pulvérisé*; occasionally they are repeated tactically in a new context to reveal fresh meanings, as in *En trente-trois morceaux* (1956) and in the section “Faute de sommeil, l'écorce . . .” of the volume *La nuit talismanique* (1972). The aphorisms are varied in themes, ideas and feelings, and also in structure (some have a syntax of Mallarméan complexity); and whether they form a volume or part of a volume or—a particularly important use—are placed at crucial points from volume to volume, they are patterned and organized so as to create links and relationships, to awaken echoes and give resonance and unity to the whole work. It is one of the many paradoxes in Char's work that its satisfying coherence is achieved largely by means of poetic fragments.

In his use of the aphorism Char has been influenced by predecessors such as Lautréamont (the Lautréamont of *Poésies*) and Rimbaud. Surrealism, too, played its part. Char has stated that he knew nothing about surrealism (except for two or three poems by Éluard) when, at the age of seventeen, he began *Arsenal*; it was during 1929–39, while he was a member of the surrealist group, that he developed one of his principal techniques: namely, the juxtaposition of widely differing and conflicting words and images. He preferred, however, conscious to unconscious methods, and by making strange images confront each other within the strict confines of the aphorism, he gave them unusual tension and power. The electric shock of surprise and pleasure which the surrealists obtained only fitfully in the flow of their “automatic” writings Char has consistently achieved in the disciplined form of his miniature, epigrammatic poems.

The most important and enduring influence came, however, from his reading of the pre-Socratic philosophers—Parmenides, Empedocles and Heraclitus, and also Hippocrates, who imitated the style of Heraclitus and first used the term *aphorisms* to describe his own, mainly medical precepts. It is significant that Char chose two Greek quotations, the first from Heraclitus, the second from Empedocles, as epigraphs for *Le marteau sans maître* (new edition, 1945) and that two of his main themes—the journey and the unknown—are contained in the Heraclitean aphorism, “One must remember also the man who forgets which way the road leads.” In 1938 Char acknowledged, in reply to a questionnaire on poetry, a literary debt to Heraclitus, whom he described as “l'homme magnétiquement le mieux établi”;<sup>2</sup> and ten years later, in a preface to Yves Battistini's edition of some of the Heraclitean fragments,<sup>3</sup> he commented on the “souverain pouvoir ascensionnel” of the Greek philosopher's style. A similar force is found in Char's own work, and the influence of Heraclitus's ideas is pervasive in the aphorisms, notably the belief that all is in a state of perpetual change and becoming and that unity results from a conflict of opposites. But Char's terms are more poetic, and for him the “opposites” are “tangibles.” He writes of an “exaltante alliance des contraires,” and in his continuing quest or “Recherche de la base et du sommet” he gives them sensuous, concrete form as seagull and shark, stars and embers, mountain peak and torrent, et cetera.

Although Char's aphorisms are so compact with intertwinéd meanings that they defy any neat arrangement into categories of subject and theme, it is possible to discern three subjects which preoccupy and inspire him: nature, poetry, man and the human condition. That order does not indicate any sharp division between each of the three kinds, still less a precise chronological sequence. Yet it can be said that while aphorisms inspired by nature occur from the beginning to the end of his work, the aphorisms on poetry seem to be concentrated around the middle of his career, and those about man and the human condition become more numerous in the volumes that have appeared since 1964.

Nature for Char means, above all, L'Isle-sur-Sorgue in the Vaucluse, where he was born and now lives. Its flora, fauna and geographical features are more than the background to his work; they are the source of his most characteristic images and themes. He himself has declared: “Étant dans ce pays, étant de ce pays, ce que j'ai mis dans la poésie, c'est ce que la nature me donnait”; and as he has explained, the nature of Provence was often the starting point for his *forme aphoristique*. He sees the Provençal countryside as “toute en paysages aphoristiques,” and he gives as examples the Fontaine-

de-Vaucluse and the Alpilles.<sup>4</sup> Char may, of course, be projecting onto nature his own ideas and a personal vision; but he frequently seems to see nature as the primordial Poet who has made, and still makes, "statements" which, although they may appear slight—crevices in a rock, a spring of water, a tree in flower—are like profoundly significant aphorisms, or *sentences* (as Char also calls them).

If Char receives from nature, he also gives back, and this constant interchange is a vital aspect of his work. He declares his debt in an aphoristic statement about his childhood and education: "L'aubépine en fleurs fut mon premier alphabet" (*L'âge cassant*). The simplicity of the affirmation, the normal syntax, the familiar nouns *aubépine* and *alphabet* make this one of Char's least hermetic aphorisms, and one that is immediately accessible to the reader. But the simplest of his aphorisms are rich in associations and have many meanings. The *aubépine*, which occurs in four other poems, expresses the tenacious, unsentimental relationship between nature and man, child and poet, beginning and end, growth and flowering, time past and—through a precarious present—the future which, as Char dares to hope, will be fertile and *reverdisant*. In addition, the *aubépine* symbolizes both the innocence of childhood and the ideal of the writer, "la tache pure au-delà de l'écriture souillée" (*À une sérénité crispée*). This complex simplicity or, to use Char's own expression, this *clarté énigmatique*, in which clarity of utterance is accompanied by an unfolding of meanings, characterizes many aphorisms where the references to nature are extended from the personal and particular to the general, as in these examples:

Le fruit est aveugle. C'est l'arbre qui voit. (*Feuillets d'Hypnos*)

J'aime l'homme incertain de ses fins comme l'est, en avril, l'arbre fruitier. (*À une sérénité crispée*)

Chêne par dérision fougueux, chêne à l'attache, entouré de décombres. (Ibid.)

L'oiseau et l'arbre sont conjoints en nous. L'un va et vient, l'autre maugrée et pousse. (Ibid.)

Pouvoir marcher, sans tromper l'oiseau, du cœur de l'arbre à l'extase du fruit. (*Le poème pulvérisé*)

Celui qui se fie au tournesol ne méditera pas dans la maison. Toutes les pensées de l'amour deviendront ses pensées. (Ibid.)

La terre qui reçoit la graine est triste. La graine qui va tout risquer est heureuse. (*La bibliothèque est en feu*)

Char's aphorisms inspired by trees, birds, the earth, plants, flowers, insects and a host of small creatures he calls "le peuple des prés" are more than "nature aphorisms." They never express a sentimental or romantic attitude, nor facile optimism in nature's beneficent

power. They define a faith and embody in concrete images a measured homage to life, in which apprehension is balanced by confidence.

Aphorisms about poetry itself occur frequently in Char's work, and in some of his volumes there are sections devoted almost exclusively to statements about the nature and function of the poet, poetry and the poem, imagination and the image, et cetera. "Partage formel," for example, in *Seuls demeurent* (1945) is composed of fifty-five aphorisms, forty-two of them directly related to poetry. These are of special interest because they were written during the war and the Resistance period and mark a break and, at the same time, a continuing link with the surrealists, his "bons compagnons de révolte," and their conception of poetry. In 1967 Char (a skilled anthologist of his own poetry) published a volume *Sur la poésie*,<sup>5</sup> consisting of fifty aphorisms he had selected from *Seuls demeurent* and subsequent volumes.

From 1967 to the present day the proportion of aphorisms on poetry to those on man and the human condition has progressively diminished, a change only partly explained by Char's serious illness in May 1968. In any event, there are no direct references to poetry in *Dans la pluie giboyeuse* (1966) and only one in the new poems included in *La nuit talismanique* (1972), except for the text "Baudelaire mécontente Nietzsche," in which, significantly, Baudelaire is considered in the perspective of suffering and death. In *Aromates chasseurs* (1975) there are no explicit allusions to poetry, apart from the inclusion of Rimbaud's cry "Voici le temps des Assassins!" in "Dieux et mort," where Char, outdoing his predecessor in virulence, denounces our age as "le Temps des délateurs." The thirty-five aphorisms of *Faire du chemin avec . . .*, which appeared last year, contain two references to poetry, in one of which it is seen as a possible help in saving man from complete spiritual death; but the emphasis is again on man's impoverished present, and the final comment is "Ah! aujourd'hui tout se chante en cendres, l'étoile autant que nous."

English readers, who have been accustomed to view poetic theory and practice, writing about poetry and composing poems, as separate activities, may find Char's aphorisms on poetry a self-conscious exercise or an irrelevant metaphysical discussion. French readers experience no such reactions or inhibitions, for they have recognized, especially since the time of Mallarmé, that poetry itself can be a valid, exciting and even a major poetic theme. It is, after all, a homage to man's greatest gift, the creative spirit; and to write poetry which is at the same time a meditation on the writing of poetry is one of the preoccupations of present-day French poets.

Char's *poèmes-poésie* (if one may coin a term for this genre) are so numerous, particularly in the volumes published between 1945 and 1957, and so diverse that, taken together, they form a complete *art poétique*, as well as expressing a more general humanistic attitude or philosophy. In this respect, it is significant that, in them, the poet is never seen as a heroic figure, prophet, mage or *voyant*, but simply as a man; and that non-esthetic, moral terms are frequently used to describe the loyalty, responsibility and duties of the poet not only to himself and his inspiration but also to his public. Revolt and a loyal struggle are at the center of Char's poetic faith, and an aphorism defines the poet's first duty: "Au centre de la poésie, un contradicteur t'attend. C'est ton souverain. Lutte loyalement contre lui" (*À une sérénité crispée*). Many poets have discussed in their theoretical writings the paradox of the sterile conflict that results in creation (and it is the theme of most of Mallarmé's poems), but Char has expressed in a single sentence the anguished struggle and the ecstasy of creation: "Le poème est ascension furieuse; la poésie, le jeu des berges arides" (*Feuillets d'Hypnos*). Even more concisely, he has evoked the emotional dynamism—and the mystery—of this phenomenon in the three words that form the title of *Fureur et mystère* (1948).

Not all the aphorisms on poetry are tense with conflicting ideas and words that generate rhythmic energy, and in some there are no images. As an example of these low-voltage pronouncements one can quote the following: "Le poète, susceptible d'exagération, évalue correctement dans le supplice" (*Feuillets d'Hypnos*). But the expression is always striking, and the reader is forced to develop a condensed thought and reflect on its many possible meanings. Even if the aphorism does not deal with any aspect of the dramatic struggle between inspiration, the poem and the poet and is limited to a statement about his various roles as, for example, the "conservateur des infinis visages du vivant" (*Feuillets d'Hypnos*) or the "veilleur éphémère du monde à la lisière de la peur" (*En trente-trois morceaux*), the words are not inert; they are charged with the sense of a greater drama and stretch out like lifelines to modern man, who, bewitched by the siren songs of scientists and technicians, walks "d'un pas de somnambule . . . vers les mines meurtrières" (*Feuillets d'Hypnos*). Unlike the Heraclitean fragments, which resemble oracular statements hurled into a void, Char's aphorisms are addressed to a public for whom he feels personal concern and responsibility. He believes, in fact, that the aphorism is a form of poetry peculiarly well suited to the exceptional conditions of our age. In this *époque oppressive*, when few people have time to read and reflect, they must be given, he says, "cette forme brève qui les projette . . . et les absout."<sup>6</sup>

It is perhaps natural that, with aphorisms about man and the human condition, we should on occasion be reminded of *moralistes* such as La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Vauvenargues, Chamfort and Joubert. Char would doubtless reject any rapprochement between his aphorisms and the maxims of La Rochefoucauld's *triste livre* (as Rousseau called it); but a comparison does throw into the sharpest possible relief the generosity of spirit, the dynamic, imaginative and essentially poetic qualities of Char's aphorisms on man's condition. He is as acutely aware as any *moraliste* of human imperfections and of man's savagery to man; but these are rarely mentioned in his poetry, and never in a detached or cynical way. He is the healer rather than the analyst, and human failings are seen through his unshakable faith in life and his belief that man has been created "pour des moments peu communs" and can, by his own efforts, transform at least some of his inner darkness into light.

It is in aphorisms about death that we feel most poignantly the depth and sincerity of Char's tribute to life, "notre vie des moissons et des déserts." These aphorisms are varying aspects of a constant attitude, and they range from tenderness and compassion to profound pessimism (or as the poet prefers to call it, an *optimisme tragique*) and an impassioned denunciation of our materialistic age and its *chaos sanglant*. In writing about death Char thinks not only of the certainty of personal death but also of the possibility of the death of our civilization. Steady contemplation of the human tragedy has given these aphorisms a stark simplicity that is reminiscent of Heraclitus's statement: "Man, like a light in the night, is kindled and put out." Char declares, in *Aromates chasseurs*, "Toi qui nais appartiens à l'éclair"; and like the flash of light and those other emblems of ephemeral life the firefly and the glowworm that figure in his poems, he too will be "put out"; and in *L'âge cassant* he states: "L'homme: l'air qu'il respire, un jour l'aspire; la terre prend les restes."

For Char, the end is as simple, and as mysterious, as the beginning. There is an exchange or a giving back; but there is also a return and a transformation. And the poet who, thirty years ago, in the preface to *Le poème pulvérisé*, asked of life, "Comment vivre sans inconnu devant soi?" now, in *La nuit talismanique*, says of death: "Mourir, c'est passer à travers le chas de l'aiguille après de multiples feuillaisons. Il faut aller à travers la mort pour émerger devant la vie, dans l'état de modeste souveraine." The biblical imagery of passing through the eye of a needle, used in a nonreligious context, as well as the images drawn from nature, points up an ironic contrast between Christian belief and Char's Heraclitean and fundamentally poetic faith.

René Char has taken the aphorism, a traditional and

minor literary genre, and transformed it into an instrument of great flexibility and power. He has enlarged its scope to include a variety of fresh themes from the eternal commonplaces—love, beauty, death—to all aspects of nature, moral precepts, poetry, man and his condition. His *art bref*, with its constant dialogue between the poet and poetry, has affinities with the linguistic experiments of his younger contemporaries in France; but for him, poetry has never been merely an *écriture* and the poet its anonymous *scripteur*. His dialogue with language is intimately related to his dialogue with life; and the poet who experiences the *ascension furieuse* of inspiration, its *méridienne force d'ascension*, is ultimately the same as *l'homme debout*, the man whom the poet salutes in several poems such as “Louis Curel de la Sorgue,” “Fenaison” and “Le visage nuptial.”<sup>7</sup>

In *Fureur et mystère* Char wrote: “Rien ne m'obsède que la vie.” He has, of course, been equally obsessed by art, by the transforming of life into poems, which he has described as “des bouts d'existence incorruptibles.”

For him, poetry and truth have always been, as he says in “Partage formel,” synonymous; and throughout his work esthetic and moral values are invariably fused. His aphorisms are exemplary witnesses of a loyal and remarkably fertile struggle to reconcile the demands of both life and art.

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<sup>1</sup> *Arsenal* was preceded in 1928 by *Les cloches sur le cœur*; but as most of the poems in this volume have been destroyed by Char himself, *Arsenal* is now considered his first work.

<sup>2</sup> *La poésie indispensable*, Paris, GLM, no. 8, October 1938. Text and reply reprinted in *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (new edition), 1965, pp. 112–13.

<sup>3</sup> *Héraclite d'Ephèse*, Cahiers d'Art, 1948, pp. 11–15. Reprinted in *RBS*, 90–92.

<sup>4</sup> See Edith Mora's important interview with Char, “Poésie-sur-Sorgue,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 16 September 1965, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> A new and enlarged edition of *Sur la poésie*, Paris, GLM, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> See “Poésie-sur-Sorgue.”

<sup>7</sup> In his introductory notice to the catalogue *Présence de René Char* of the exhibition held at Tunis (7–20 February 1977) the poet Lorand Gaspar refers to Char as “cet homme debout sur le seuil de la Parole.”

## Juxtaposition in the Poetry of René Char

By MICHAEL J. WORTON In his preface to *Fureur et mystère* Yves Berger writes:

“Of all today's poets, René Char is the greatest match-maker of words. I am thinking here only of those words which, by their sound or their meaning, are least suited to go together. Words which, by their very nature, were destined never to meet.” It is clear, even on first acquaintance with Char's poetry, that he achieves much of his success through the juxtaposition of terms which, while seemingly unsuited, nonetheless “work” together, creating new and unexpected images and presenting a world in which objects have a significance which transcends the purely physical.

While it is a platitude to affirm that all literature is the product of the juxtaposition of words, it is perhaps only since Mallarmé that the primacy of the word over even the theme has been recognized: “Mais, Degas, ce n'est point avec des idées que l'on fait des vers . . . *C'est avec des mots.*”<sup>1</sup> Char's is not a generous pen. No word is freely given, each being carefully weighed not merely to verify its suitability but to establish its necessity, as the poet made clear in 1968: “J'aime trop les mots pour les gaspiller.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview some eighteen years earlier Jacques Charpier asked for the poet's views on “cet autre langage qui nous caresse, nous distrait de la

Terre.” The poet's answer is revelatory: “Je ne vois là qu'un excédant verbal, un surplus de la connaissance. L'écume ne désaltère pas, mais l'eau pure, l'eau intégrale. L'écume n'est qu'écoeurante ou jolie.”<sup>3</sup> These two statements, made in conversation and not later incorporated into Char's published works as were other such statements,<sup>4</sup> are nonetheless capital for an understanding of Char's poetry; for they indicate clearly his view of poetry: it must be *essential*, not merely a verbal or sonorous artifact existing only in the margin of human knowledge. Poetry is *l'eau pure* and, like spring water, both nourishes and purifies, quenching the human thirst for unity and purity. This, then, is the nature of Char's poetic search: he constantly desires lucidity, an awareness of the inherent unity of the world, searching through his poetry which must itself be pure; there can be no mistakes, no uncontrolled movements of lyricism.

This lucidity will result only from a perception of the opposites and contradictions which constitute the world; the poet must therefore create a verbal world which evokes the coexistence of opposites. Char forces words together, making them work their poetic effect through strife rather than through harmony. The obvious advantage of clash is that it opens up rather than limits the connotational possibilities of the words em-