

## The Role of Rimbaud in Char's Poetry

To the Editor:

Limited space and time make it impossible to examine here the method, style, knowledge, and understanding demonstrated in Virginia A. La Charité's recent *PMLA* article titled "The Role of Rimbaud in Char's Poetry" (89, 1974, 57–63). Such matters as the alleged supernaturalism of Rimbaud, and Char's "subsequent exchange to the fraternal level" require careful and detailed critical analysis. I restrict the commentary below to correction of the major factual oversights:

1. "La Conversation souveraine" is an essay examining the place of various authors within the history of world literature. In the essay, only Apollinaire and Reverdy are discussed by Char as personal preferences and, perhaps, influences. Rimbaud is dismissed with two words, part of one sentence: "Rimbaud règne, Lautréamont lègue." The very juxtaposition should make us wonder whether Char's early expressions of violence and revolt are not the bequest of Isidore Ducasse rather than legacies of Rimbaud. In "Page d'ascendants pour l'an 1964," Rimbaud is reduced to the sentence quoted by La Charité (p. 57). The text also mentions Heraclitus. Nothing in either essay documents Char's "esthetic indebtedness" to Rimbaud. In fact, even "En 1871" and "Arthur Rimbaud," two texts evoking the poet, do not acknowledge Rimbaud as the artistic source of Char's "vision, teleology, and practice." The only direct statement of debt is made in a 1938 survey conducted by the surrealists and published in the 1965 edition of *Recherche de la base et du sommet* as "La Poésie indispensable." The text should have been discussed by La Charité.

2. Another oversight, related to the first, is the author's claim that "Rimbaud is quantitatively more prominent than . . . Heraclitus" (p. 57) in the works of Char. Heraclitus is mentioned twice in *Partage formel* (nos. ix, xvii). His name appears in "Page d'ascendants . . ." and "Arthur Rimbaud." Char writes an introduction to Battistini's translations of Heraclitus' *Fragments*. In "La Barque à la proue altérée," the 1967 essay dedicated to Jean Beaufret, Heraclitus is indirectly evoked. In "La Poésie indispensable," Heraclitus is referred to as "l'homme magnétiquement le mieux établi," while Rimbaud appears only as the poet "aux avant-bras de cervelle." Thus, even by La Charité's method and count, the assertion that "Rimbaud is quantitatively more prominent" is false.

3. Customarily, we identify the publisher of a book by the publishing house. The edition of Rimbaud's *Œuvres* referred to by the author (p. 57 and n. 1) was published by the Club français du Livre, not credited in La Charité's article.

4. Having evoked the labels applied to Rimbaud, Char specifically states, in the opening sentences of

the essay "Arthur Rimbaud," that these labels "ne nous intéressent pas . . ." It is therefore incorrect to imply (p. 57) Char's identification with Rimbaud the "enfant terrible" and "le Voyou."

5. Asserting that inclusion of early texts mentioning Rimbaud in the 1965 edition of *Recherche . . .* shows Char's "increasing awareness . . . of the important role that Rimbaud has played" (p. 63, n. 2), the author overlooks the purpose of the edition. It is a summa of Char's critical writings, including even private letters. Early and late texts—on many different subjects—are included here for the first time to make them more available to the general reader. They say nothing about increasing awareness of influences.

6. Rebellious force is not indicated by several of the terms listed by La Charité (p. 58), and the abstract noun *vigueur* does not belong in the list of nouns denoting tools or agents. A poet's *role* can hardly be described as *vigor*.

7. Is it not a case of misrepresentation to quote only parts of sentences, without suspension points? The author's partial quote on page 57 correctly reads: "Poésie, unique montée des hommes, que le soleil des morts ne peut assombrir dans l'infini parfait et burlesque."

8. The equation of anguish and *supplice* (p. 58) is a linguistic slip. In the particular context alluded to by Char's line quoted (i.e., the tactical calculations of the poet turned partisan), the two terms *angoisse* and *supplice* are not only contradictory but mutually exclusive. Of the former, Char says: "Si l'angoisse qui nous évide abandonnait sa grotte glacée, si l'amante dans notre cœur arrêta la pluie de fourmis, le Chant reprendrait" ("Nous avons," *La Parole en archipel*). The problem with quoting words and images out of context is, of course, that it distorts the picture.

9. Examination of La Charité's titles and dates reveals several errors. The book mentioned on page 58 should be correctly identified as *Poèmes des deux années 1953–1954*.

10. In note 9, the title should read: *Quatre fascicules* (first published in the *Cahiers du Sud*, No. 300, 1950). Incidentally, I hope the Rimbaldians among us will give us a quick overview of Rimbaud's countless marvelous beasts. Quite apart from their extraordinary number, however, Rimbaud's animals come alive as Char's rarely do. For Char, the painted animals of Lascaux and the "oiseau spirituel" have a predominantly symbolic significance.

11. *Seuls demeurent*, 1945, is the first collection to contain "Evadné." This text was not, as the author indicates (p. 61), part of *Le Visage nuptial* in 1938.

12. Another slip occurs in note 4. The poem "Conduite" was not published until 1944. The date given by La Charité (1938) applies only to the poem

titled "Le Visage nuptial," not to the collection of that title which includes "Conduite."

13. "Sous un portrait de Rimbaud," *Soleil*, June 1951, and *Arthur Rimbaud boulevard d'enfer* (Paris: n.p., 1951) should figure in the author's inventory (n. 2) of Char texts mentioning Rimbaud. By the way, quantitative prominence does not necessarily signify influence, especially when quantity is (mis-)measured, as here, by the mere evocation of a name.

14. The text and notes 3 and 10 of La Charité's article lead one to believe that the author is unaware of the vast amount of Char scholarship published during the last ten years. She seems to rely heavily—without giving credit—on Pierre Guerre's 1963 introduction to Char (Paris: Seghers) which first made a case for the poet's "morale poétique," his "vaste perspective humaine," and for the "humanisation du poète." References to similarities between Rimbaud and Char have become a commonplace of literary criticism. For a study of Char's use of colors, the reader should turn to the excellent article by Yves Battistini, "Les couleurs dans l'œuvre de Char," *L'Arc*, No. 22 (Summer 1963).

15. Unqualified redefinition of the principles of *teleology* as "representation of poetic activity, action, love, experience, risk, human condition, man, nature" (p. 59) and "color" (p. 62 and n. 10) calls for justification.

16. Description of the poems of *Les Cloches sur le cœur* as both "less personal" and "less objective" (p. 62) is a contradiction in terms. Only the latter applies to the 1928 volume.

17. Yet more embarrassing is the translation of *le Verbe* of Rimbaud as *the verb* (twice, p. 62). "In the beginning was the verb"?

18. It cannot be correct to say both that (a) "The idea of moral responsibility in Rimbaud's work is ignored," and that (b) "he even posits a possible moral stance" (p. 58).

19. Nearly all of the author's statements are unsubstantiated. Thus, claims like "Char demands . . . poetic responsibility in a moral sense . . . he is a humanist who . . . also poeticizes man, for in his work he substitutes the term *man* for *poet*" must be supported by something other than parenthetical references to titles, given by La Charité (p. 58) as: "*Lettera amorosa*, 1953; *Les Poèmes de deux années* [sic], 1955." *Lettera amorosa* is written predominantly (as any letter would be) in the first person singular. The author describes himself as "un homme si haletant" set in contrast to the new man, "déjà mi-liquide, mi-fleur," and the "silhouettes d'hommes" seen in the distance. Poetizations, perhaps, but not in the moral and humanistic sense alleged. These are the only instances of the word *man* in

*Lettera amorosa*. The reader can establish his own count in *Poèmes des deux années*. The texts in that collection exalt the role of the poet. It matters little whether Char refers to him as *je, tu, il, nous, vous*, or *le poète*, all of them designations of himself to which, by 1955, Char had accustomed his readers. The point is made explicit in "Pourquoi la journée vole," a sort of *postface* (in italics, for emphasis) of *Poèmes des deux années*: "Cités, patries et provinces sont trop infatuées ou désuètes pour accueillir la naissance du poète et en décider l'annexion. Le poète s'appuie . . . à quelque arbre . . . il doit répondre qu'il est du pays d'à côté . . . Le poète vivifie . . ." The word *man* is, obviously, not substituted for *poet*, and the text expresses a strange sort of humanism, by whatever definition. (The author doesn't say.)

20. Confusions of this nature call for clarification. Any assessment of "The Role of Rimbaud in Char's Poetry" must take into account the major corrections listed here. Incidentally, two other mistakes in an earlier La Charité comment on Char (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 526–28) should be corrected. In the 1928 edition of *Les Cloches sur le cœur*, La Charité's misprint, "Prêt au dépoillement," does not appear. The version of "Sil-lage" given by her (p. 526):

Il n'est de similitude  
Entre tes doigts *gaines* de peau

reads, in 1928:

Entre tes doigts *gainés* de peau

*Les Cloches sur le cœur* never had another edition.

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*Ms. La Charité replies:*

Since Mechthild Cranston notes no substantive area of disagreement, I assume that she agrees with the thrust of my article. What follows is a tiresome ramble through her bibliographical boners. My comments refer to her own fuzzy twenty-point outline.

1. *La Conversation souveraine* (in italics) is not an essay; it is a collection of twenty-three texts and essays. Char's statement—"Rimbaud règne"—is all the more powerful in its crisped alliterative form. I dispute Cranston's contention that Char's expression of "violence and revolt" is more akin to that of Lautréamont. In "Essai d'introduction" (*L'Herne*, 15, 1971), Dominique Fourcade suggests that Char's rejection of orthodox surrealism extends "jusqu'à Lautréamont même" (p. 23)—I agree. Char has not devoted a poem, essay, or aphorism to Lautréamont. The quote from "Page