

ously misread the essay. For in it Eliot says that emotions which the poet “has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him” (p. 21), refers to his whole view specifically as “this Impersonal theory of poetry” (pp. 17–18; the capitalization is Eliot’s), and speaks of the artist’s “continual extinction of personality” (p. 17). He continues: “My meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality” (pp. 19–20); and, finally: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion [these are not, it may be noticed, true either-or alternatives]; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”—though, as he notes, one cannot “escape” from what one hasn’t (p. 21).

The central emphasis of the essay is then certainly on “impersonality,” and it was this “Impersonal theory” which became so influential and which he himself abandoned gradually or, over the years, revised beyond recognition. Five years after it was propounded, a modification appeared in the passage Austin quotes from the essay “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” (1924)—the artist “expresses his personality indirectly”—but even this modification is severely limited by the discussion of ballet, again emphasizing the impersonal, which precedes it in the same paragraph (p. 113; too long to quote and too complex in its implications to discuss here). It is about a decade after the essay on “Tradition,” during the years from 1929 to 1932, that we find Eliot specifically affirming and indeed emphasizing the value of personality and of “the whole” corpus of a poet’s work “united by one significant, consistent, and developing personality”: this is what “matters most,” he now believed. The passage from the essay on Yeats in 1940, of which Austin quotes the beginning, does not profess to explain or defend his former views. Of the “impersonality” advocated in his “early essays,” he merely says: “It may be that I expressed myself badly, or *that I had only an adolescent grasp of that idea—as I can never bear to re-read my own prose writings, I am willing to leave the point unsettled—but I think now, at least, that the truth of the matter is as follows*” (*On Poetry and Poets*, New York: Farrar, 1957, p. 299; my italics). And what he thinks “now” proves to be very different from what he had actually said more than twenty years before (why should it not be?).—It is nevertheless true, and may be cited in favor of Austin’s argument, that in practice, even in the early years, Eliot’s own criticism did not strictly eschew personality or the personal. There is personal speculation about Shakespeare in the essay on Hamlet.

I am grateful for the tact with which Austin supplies my lost and hence inexact quotation; I had found it too, but not in time, in what should have been an

obvious place to think of, the important essay of 1932 on John Ford.

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### René Char 1923–28

To the Editor:

Mechthild Cranston’s recent essay, “René Char 1923–28: The Young Poet’s Struggle for Communication” (*PMLA* 87, 1972, 1016–22), boggles the mind. Her presentation is based on such faulty scholarship that one can only marvel at how the article found its way into the pages of *PMLA*. To be sure, there is always room for honest differences of opinion in matters of interpretation, but the following comments will show that Cranston was hardly in a position to interpret Char’s early years.

1. Cranston’s discussion of “Sillage” purports to be based on the text as published in *Les Cloches sur le cœur* (1928); however, the text she is using is the revised text, “Sillage noir,” as it appears in the 1946 and 1950 editions of *Premières alluvions*. According to Cranston, “Sillage” underwent “little change” (p. 1016), when in fact the entire last half of the 1928 text bears no resemblance to the last two stanzas of “Sillage noir,” the 1946 and 1950 text. “Sillage” consists of fourteen lines, while “Sillage noir” is a fifteen-line poem. The last five lines of “Sillage” were deleted; only the first nine are retained in the 1946, 1950 poem and the last six lines of “Sillage noir” were added after 1929. This major revision accounts in part for the title change. There is also one change in the original nine lines; the 1928 text reads “Tu retrouves” (l. 5), while the 1946 text shows a shift from the present to the imperfect tense, “Tu retrouvais,” which is the form cited by Cranston on p. 1017 and discussed on p. 1018. The text of “Sillage” is as follows (the lines in italics are those deleted in the later version):

#### Sillage

Ce col enroulé de tes plaintes  
Au recueil du couchant sonore  
N’est-il pas par son mutisme  
Le symbole froid de jadis

Où à chaque étage de nue  
Tu retrouves mêlés aux brousses  
Les gémissements que tu proférais  
Pour rassurer ton orgueil

Il n’est de similitude  
*Entre tes doigts gaines de peau*  
*Badinant avec le feuillage*  
*Amorphe de ce haut-fourneau*

*Sur un tabouret de nuage  
Et les arrhes de sol qui patinent les champs*

It is understandable that Cranston's falsification of the 1928 text stems from the fact that she has not bothered to read it, but there is no excuse for her misleading presentation of the 1946 and 1950 text; the text she cites on p. 1017 are stanzas 1 and 3, while stanza 2 is quoted on p. 1018. The correct text of "Sillage noir" is as follows (the lines in italics are those which do not appear in 1928):

*Sillage noir*

Ce col enroulé de tes plaintes  
Au recueil du couchant sonore  
N'est-il pas par son mutisme  
Le symbole froid de jadis  
Où à chaque étage de nue  
Tu retrouvais mêlés aux brousses  
Les gémisséments que tu proférais  
Pour rassurer ton orgueil

Il n'est de similitude  
*Il n'est que solitude*  
*Il n'est qu'aboïement et chien*

*L'amour qui s'était assoupi*  
*Comme la mer sous une vague*  
*Garde un visage de momie*  
*Et parle une langue de sable.*

Comparison of the two texts shows that the first eight lines of the poem were divided into two stanzas in 1928, but these were regrouped to form one stanza in 1946 and 1950. Line 9 of the 1946, 1950 text could not have been added (p. 1018) from *Le Tombeau des secrets* (1930) because it is in the original 1928 text. Lines 10 and 11 of the 1946, 1950 text do not come from any previously published work although Cranston states (p. 1018) that they are also from *Le Tombeau des secrets*. The last stanza of "Sillage noir" was taken from the last stanza of "La Tête sous l'oreiller," *Arsenal* (1929); this 1929 poem was further modified in the 1930 edition of *Arsenal*; the 1929 line, "L'amour qui s'était assoupi," was deleted in 1930, and the phrase "l'amour" was mutated into a subtitle; significantly, it is the 1929 form, not the 1930 version, that Char moved to form the 1946 text, "Sillage noir." Most of Cranston's argument is based on lines that postdate Char's early years, for the 1928 text contains no references or allusions to mountains, night, sea, face, barking dogs, etc. (pp. 1017–18).

2. There are not three but four prose poems in *Les Cloches sur le cœur*: "Prêt au dépouillement," "Variations en caractères," "Constitution de l'autre terre," and "Un oiseau suffit à la vie." Cranston's erroneous figure of three on page 1016 can be traced to my own work, *The Poetics and the Poetry of René Char*, where

on page 27 I make this statement. I am grateful to Cranston for the opportunity she has given me to correct myself in print. By the same token, I would have appreciated recognition for a number of other accurate facts and insights she culled from my work.

3. Cranston is correct in pointing out that P. A. Benoît gives 1922–26 as the dates of composition for *Les Cloches sur le cœur* (p. 1016); however, she should have noted that in the 1928 volume itself Char gives the dates as 1925–27.

4. On page 1017, Cranston states that the imperfect tense is the dominant tense of *Les Cloches sur le cœur*. Even a casual reading of the thirty-eight texts reveals that it is not the dominant tense; in fact, it is a little used tense in the volume. The past tenses that are used in any noticeable quantity are the past indefinite and past definite.

5. The discussion of the two "Jouvence" texts is specious due to Cranston's misreading of source materials. The four lines which constitute "Jouvence I" are those which Char dates in the 1946 edition of *Premières alluvions* as having been composed in 1923–25. But, the text cited on page 1019 by Cranston is obviously the 1950 form, for the 1946 version reads "Ceux qui partent pour les nuages," not "aux nuages." Moreover, "Jouvence II" does not appear in the 1946 edition as Cranston claims on page 1020; it appears only in the 1950 edition. Even more appalling is the fact that Cranston is unaware of the existing variant text that represents a rewriting of the early poem and a proposed draft for the later text; the variant text, "A l'horizon," was dedicated to André Breton and published in *Le Tombeau des secrets* (1930):

*A l'horizon*

A André Breton

Ceux qui partent pour les nuages  
Croient solide comme un roc  
A l'avenir de la mer  
Ouverte à l'œil unique

Perhaps no other text by Char shows as clearly his poetic evolution from a presurreal stance, "Jouvence I," to adherence to the movement, "A l'horizon," to a postsurreal (and mature) position, "Jouvence II." Certainly, any discussion of how Char "learns first to see, then to listen, and finally, to hear" (Cranston's abstract, p. 960) should take into account the only Char text that dates from his early years and that reappears during his surrealist period and then again in his own assessment of his presurreal years.

6. The text, "Sur le volet d'une fenêtre" (p. 1021), was not punctuated until Char moved it to *Fureur et mystère* (1948). It is unpunctuated in the 1946 edition of *Premières alluvions*, just as all the verse texts of *Les Cloches sur le cœur* and the two editions of *Premières*

*alluvions* are unpunctuated. Punctuation does play a role in Char's evolution; the pre-*Cloches* text, "Ce soir," is punctuated, but none of Char's volumes of verse published prior to 1938 are punctuated. The first punctuated edition of verse poems is *Dehors la nuit est gouvernée* (1938), and all subsequent original editions of verse are punctuated with the exception of the two editions of *Premières alluvions* because they represent the poet's retrospective view of his early poems. The very use of punctuation in "Ce soir" confirms its early date of composition. It should also be noted that only when Char includes texts from *Le Marteau sans maître* (first published in 1934) in *Commune présence* (1964) are any of those texts punctuated; the 1945 and 1963 editions of *Le Marteau sans maître* are without punctuation because Char is fully aware that his own early poetics includes the deliberate omission of all punctuation from verse texts.

7. Printing errors are unavoidable; for example, the title of the 1928 text of "Prêt au dépouillement" is misprinted in the 1928 edition as "Prêt au dépoillement." Obviously, Cranston could not know this since she is not familiar with the original edition. At all events, in view of the numerous serious mistakes in her essay, perhaps I should also point out that my book was not published in 1958 as reported on page 1022, note 4, but in 1968.

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Professor Cranston replies:

1. One footnote (appearing, alas, in an earlier chapter of my forthcoming book on Char that includes the *PMLA* article here in question) stating that I always quote my authors in their latest available editions, and three suspension points (overlooked by the printer) after the first eight lines of "Sillage noir" would have saved La Charité's transitively boggled mind most of the above commentary. Or would it? For the really "boggling" (i.e., frightening) thing about the *PMLA* study must have been footnote six. To a relatively young author *unius libri* who would be a critic of French poetry, the public revelation of her incompetence in translating plain French prose must have come as a shock (see again La Charité, *The Poetics and the Poetry of René Char*, p. 18, and my n.).

But to answer La Charité's specific charges: first of all, I do not "purport" to base my discussion of "Sillage" on the 1928 edition, but should, of course, have given reference to *Premières alluvions*, 1950, correctly identified by my reader. I purposely deleted the original last five lines of "Sillage" from my discussion, since Char himself never reprinted these. The poet and I agree that texts discarded by him should not be re-published by the critic: "Il n'y a que de bons et de

mauvais poèmes, hélas! les premiers n'aidant pas les seconds et vice versa" (Letter to the author, 3 Nov. 1972). In fact, although Char spoke very warmly of my interpretations of his early texts ("si proches [de lui] par l'esprit"), I sensed a touch of annoyance in the poet on seeing the old "Chèvrefeuille" displayed once again. Yet the text is already well known to the critics, and "Ce soir," even if it is a pastiche, as Char says, still shows some of the poet's early themes and obsessions that remain with him throughout his work.

Such was the intent of my article: to show early manifestations of themes, obsessions, symbols in the verses that Char did not destroy, but that he republished—with variants, to be sure—in later volumes. Walls, mountains, night, day, sea, face, cloud, and even the dog, *all symbols* discussed by me in the *PMLA* article are part and parcel of Char's early poetics, whether "early" be defined as 1928 or 1929. The fact that the last stanza of "Sillage noir" was first published in *Arsenal* (Aug. 1929) in no way disqualifies it from discussion with the rest of the poem. As any Char critic knows, *Arsenal* is the summing up of the poet's early verses, all of which were written before he came into direct contact with the surrealists. I consider all the key elements of "Sillage noir" roughly contemporary, and all of them proven products of Char's early years. (The fact that La Charité can first print, in n. 1, the 1928 version of "Sillage" and then, on the basis of that evidence, deny even the existence of the mountain in the 1928 text, shows, of course, once again the extent of her linguistic ignorance.)

2. I apologize for the mistake presumed to be culled from La Charité. Her book should, of course, not be used as a reference tool.

3. The latest available date of composition for *Les Cloches sur le cœur* is 1922–27 (Maeght, 1971).

4. Statistically, the past tenses taken together (imperfect, past indefinite, and past definite) set the dominant tone of *Les Cloches*. In his later works, Char shifts the emphasis to the present tense. Significantly, the 1946 reprint of "Sillage" changes an original present back to the imperfect, which is more in harmony (and dominant in that sense) with other early Char verse.

5. In my discussion of the two "Jouvence" texts I do not "misread source materials." Again, I quote the poem in its latest available version. I did not include "A l'horizon" in my article because, to my mind, it does not constitute a variant of "Jouvence I." The fact that, in 1930, Char repeats a line from a 1923–25 poem and finds, in the process, the seeds of an image that will flower in a 1950 text does not make the 1930 poem a variant of "Jouvence I" and "II." It is completely beyond my comprehension how a critic, having glanced at the two "Jouvence" texts and the poem "A l'horizon" can conclude: "'Jouvence' in 1923 represented