

# **'Between' Poetry and Philosophy: René Char and Martin Heidegger**

by

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Reason is a path for the spirit and a tumult  
for the soul. (Braque)

A philosopher is a man who never ceases  
to experience, see, hear, suspect, hope, and  
dream extraordinary things. (Nietzsche)

Man is the site of openness, the there.  
(Heidegger)

This article is cast, essentially, in an interrogative mode.<sup>1</sup> It does not seek to elucidate the manifold complexities of Char's poetry or of Heidegger's philosophy. Rather, it intends to explore why and how Char, poet, Resistance hero, and anti-fascist, and Heidegger, philosopher and 'one-time Nazi', could be friends – and to examine how this friendship led Heidegger to write his *Gedachtes* ('Pensivement'; 'Thoughts') sequence of poems, which are among his last writings and bear the marks of Char's poetic practice of thinking-through-language. In other words, I hope to begin to explode the institutionalized (and hierarchical) distinction between philosophy and poetry by suggesting how an encounter and a friendship could lead the 'philosopher' Heidegger to write the *Gedachtes* poems which, while partially grounded in the idiolect of his own previous philosophical writings, are a creative and 'dependent' response to Char's idiolect and thinking.

Critics assert all too often that Char is influenced by Heidegger, and even that he is one of Heidegger's disciples. George Steiner, for example, states that Heidegger's 'doctrines on the nature of language and poetry [ ... ] have had their impact on the actual practice of such poets as René Char and Paul Celan'.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly striking that Steiner, an impressive polyglot as well as a theorist of translation, should uphold this view, since the French texts of Char and the German ones of Celan cannot possibly have the same intertextual relation with Heidegger's discourse: to assume that ideas are universal and therefore transferable/translatable is wilfully to ignore the culture-specificity and the language-specificity of thought. Both Heidegger and Char were preoccupied by language and by the functional importance of etymology and etymological play. They shared the belief that a new (or, rather, a renewed) poetico-philosophical discourse was possible and indeed necessary, and their

individual projects were consciously language-specific, despite their respective and different crucial gestures to other linguistic, pictorial, and cultural systems. Furthermore, they both recognize that authentic uses of language are necessarily (violent) interpretations and that these interpretations are themselves translations, translations which move, are eternally mobile, both between two languages and within one single language. Performances of such translation-interpretation, their works also function as an eternal call for further translation – and not only in relation to the other's language or to the Other Language that is classical Greek, but also in relation to the irrevocable difference that constituted their friendship as well as threatening it. So ... how to read their works? How to rethink influence?

## Friendship

Can we usefully speak of influence? What is influence, and how does it function? A first answer may be found in the works of Harold Bloom, who proposes a Freudian schema whereby all writers are engaged in an (ant)agonistic struggle with their 'fathers'. A second answer may be found in the intertextual theories of Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette, and Michael Riffaterre, all of which privilege readers and their responses.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Char and Heidegger, the poet expressed his opinion on the philosopher's influence on him, in characteristically trenchant terms, in a 1984 conversation with Paul Veyne:

Je n'ai rien à voir avec la philosophie de Heidegger. Je suis poète, pas philosophe en vers; Parménide et Platon n'ont rien à voir ici. Heidegger était un homme aimable, qui a su faire que nous restions en bons termes, même après que nous eûmes épuisé ce que nous avions à nous dire. Il m'intéressait surtout lorsque il ajustait si bien sa longue-vue sur les Grecs. Mais ses disciples, en général tous médiocres, m'ennuient. Par une espèce d'automatisme, ils veulent nous mettre ensemble, ils veulent que nous ayons dit la même chose. Cela ne veut rien dire. Plutôt que de vouloir que je me sois inspiré d'Heidegger, alors que j'avais déjà écrit les deux tiers de ce que j'ai écrit, on n'a qu'à lire ce que j'ai écrit, c'est tout, au lieu de supposer mécaniquement que nous ayons dit la même chose parce que nous avons été des amis.<sup>4</sup>

The role of friendship, and – secondarily – of admiration, is central here: as late as 1985, Char wrote to Blanchot to chastise him for an article in *Débat* and to defend Heidegger. It is significant also that Char chose to retain in his *Œuvres complètes* of 1983 'Impressions anciennes',<sup>5</sup> a text first published in 1950 and reworked in 1952 and 1964, and defined explicitly by Char as 'un hommage de respect, de reconnaissance et d'affection à Martin Heidegger' (*OC*, p.742). The text on Heidegger is included in the 'Grands astreignants ...' section of *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (1955), where

Char engages in his celebrated 'sovereign conversation' with such major chosen precursors as Heraclitus and Rimbaud and, especially, with such close friends as Éluard, Camus, Blanchot, and Adrienne Monnier. This responsive meditation on Heidegger's work is notable as much for its candour and the force of its language as for its comments on poetry and philosophy:

... Nous nous sommes imaginés, en 1945, que l'esprit totalitaire avait perdu, avec le nazisme, sa terreur, ses poisons souterrains et ses foudres définitifs. Mais ses excréments sont enfouis dans l'inconscient fertile des hommes. Une espèce d'indifférence colossale à l'égard de la reconnaissance des autres et de leur expression vivante, parallèlement à nous, nous informe qu'il n'y a plus de principes généraux et de morale héréditaire. (OC, p.743)

Char and Heidegger became friends in 1955, when Heidegger visited France, stating before his arrival that the person he most wanted to meet was Char – whom he regarded as the most important contemporary French thinker, more important even than Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* is in many ways a sustained philosophical response to *Being and Time*. Through the agencies of the philosopher Jean Beaufret, they met in Provence for the now famous 'Rencontres sous les marronniers' at Le Thor (1955, 1966, 1968, and 1969), and remained friends until Heidegger's death, which Char marked in a darkly luminous note entitled 'Aisé à porter':

Martin Heidegger est mort ce matin. Le soleil qui l'a couché lui a laissé ses outils et n'a retenu que l'ouvrage. Ce seuil est constant. La nuit qui s'est ouverte aime de préférence.

Mercredi, 26 mai 1976 (OC, p.725)

In this text, Char expresses both his personal grief and his 'tragic optimism' about existence in terms that are undeniably his own, but which also gesture to Heidegger's vocabulary: 'le seuil' evokes Heidegger's references to crossing thresholds, and his (problematic) use of *Kehre* (turning); 'ses outils' alerts his readers to the necessity of rethinking Heidegger's repeated use of different terms for 'tool' (*Zeug* and *Werkzeug*) in the light of one of Char's most powerful statements on the human condition: 'Enfin, si tu détruis, que ce soit avec des outils nuptiaux, OC, p.335); and the last sentence articulates an idea close to Heidegger's concept of *aletheia* (*Unverborgenheit*, unconcealedness or the coming into being of truth).

It is surely clear from these texts that Char does not regard Heidegger as a Nazi. In 1961, the French journal *Médiations* published the speeches and articles defending the Führer made by Heidegger as Rector of Freiburg University in 1933 and

1934,<sup>6</sup> yet Char continued to perceive the philosopher as a friend, affirming to Veyne in the 1980s:

Comprenez bien cela: *Heidegger était pour moi un ami. Il avait fauté, il avait été nazi pendant dix mois, pas plus. Il voulait se récupérer.* En France, Beaufret et moi l'y avons aidé, *à juste raison.* [ ... ] Et puis Heidegger ne m'a jamais tenu de propos antisémites. (my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>

While even Heidegger's most virulent critics agree that his philosophy cannot be described as biologicistic and accept that all serious German philosophers of the 1930s and 1940s were anti-biologicistic and anti-racist, it is hardly surprising that Heidegger never spoke (of) anti-Semitism with Char, whose first wife, Georgette Goldstein, was Jewish. However, it is difficult to understand how Char could have as a friend, as a 'substantial ally', someone who is reputed to have stated in 1934: 'It is the Jew Husserl who is responsible for bringing disorder to the books in our Institute's library.'<sup>8</sup>

An answer may be found by referring to the powerful forces that are friendship and admiration. From 1950 onwards, Beaufret (co-translator of the *Gedachtes* sequence) taught his philosophy students that Heidegger had colluded with the Nazis for only ten months, when he was Rector of Freiburg University, and that this collusion-collaboration was the result of an inevitable naïveté: as a metaphysical and ontological philosopher, he could not be expected to recognize the full political (and physical) implications of Nazism. Beaufret's attitude was itself naïve, if wilfully, *emotionally* so: if Heidegger was just an unthinking victim of prevailing ideologies, a philosopher who wanted only to be allowed to go on teaching, why was he banned for six years (1945-1951) from teaching publicly (*Lehrverbot*) under the de-nazification rules established by the Allied authorities? In the 1970s and early 1980s, many French sociologists and political scientists engaged in speculation on the reality of Heidegger's alleged Nazi affiliation and, more importantly, on the political dimension of his discourse. These anxious (and occasionally angry) readings culminated in the furor caused by the publication in the late 1980s of studies by Pierre Bourdieu and Victor Farias on the 'fascistic' nature of Heidegger's use of language and the extent of his collaboration with the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> Char died just before these studies were published, but his last months were undoubtedly disturbed, even haunted, by the virulent attacks on Beaufret's position as an apologist for Heidegger and for Heideggerian thinking.

Char indisputably read most of Heidegger's work through the prism of Beaufret's admiration (and Beaufret was a friend as well as a mentor for Char). However, without wishing to enmesh myself here in the labyrinthine complexities of (psycho-)biography, I think it is useful and justifiable to suggest that friendship plays a functional role, as well as an emotional role, in the late writings of Char and of

Heidegger. Bloom's interpersonal theory of the anxiety of influence and Kristeva's and Riffaterre's intertextual theories all insist, albeit in different ways, on the fact that all texts are under the jurisdiction of other texts. Yet friendship, when inscribed into a textual practice, cuts across – and challenges – the Kristevan notion that every intertextual text is under the *jurisdiction* of other discourses, which have societal, legal, and therefore anonymous power. In other words, I am suggesting that the Char/Heidegger relationship is particularly interesting because the written products of their friendship can be situated and interpreted only in the interstice between post-Freudian, psychodynamic theories and reader-based, intertextual theories. Especially in Char's work, the commitment to objectivity is allied to the will to blindness that is an essential part of friendship. And from an awareness of this blindness arises, paradoxically, the possibility of a new form of *insight* for the reader, the possibility of a different mode of reading.

### Philosophy, poetry, and language

Heidegger often describes poets as his 'neighbours' or kindred spirits. He also posits Socrates and Plato as the first 'philosophers', that is to say, as thinkers who questioned existence in a rationally analytic way: for him, the pre-Socratic thinkers (notably Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides) were thinkers in, of, and with the authentic, primordial language of the *logos*, thinkers who were caught up in the radical astonishment of being and wondering at the simple (he repeatedly refers to the Greek concept of *thaumazein*). The major conjoining factor between Char and Heidegger is undoubtedly their commitment to using 'authentic', 'primal' language in order to communicate philosophical positions that are grounded, albeit (ant)agonistically, in pre-Socratic thinking, positions that proclaim the need to experience, think, read, and write the world metaphorically. Char's attitude to philosophers is, in many ways, a reversal of Heidegger's attitude to poets. While he may privilege poets over philosophers in 'Le souhait et le constat', (*OC*, pp.745-46) and, as we saw earlier, repudiate Parmenides and Plato in one breath, thereby revealing a very different notion of the history of philosophy, he shares with Heidegger certain fundamental beliefs regarding the interaction between metaphysical and poetic thinking-as-discourse.

Heidegger proposes an ontological questioning of history in opposition to the neo-Kantian assumption that history is just one area among others for philosophical analysis, and through his own *Kehre*, his turning, his turning-back-on-himself/itself, he interrogates the past and asks the anxious but fundamental question whether philosophy itself is historically conditioned – and, if so, whether this analytic process is not reversible.

The work of both thinkers is highly imagistic, if rarely traditionally mimetic: both reject the dominant (post-)Aristotelian concept of mimesis as the imitation of reality, preferring to re-present – and thereby to reconstitute – the phenomenal world through language, to show that mimesis is about movement, change, interrogation. From his solitary childhood onwards, Char found his inspiration in the close observation of the natural world, which he *saw* and *heard* as an echo of a lost, 'ideal' past. However, he also constantly and resolutely refused the Platonic concept of the work of art as an imitation (at two removes) of an *eidos* or Idea, preferring to conceive of art as a *possibilization* of the world, and ultimately of the absent and/or lost *eidos*. Furthermore, he refused the Hegelian distinction between poetry and painting on one side and philosophy on the other because Hegel's conception of philosophy as non-figural struck him as a betrayal of what 'authentic' philosophy should be. In his war notebooks, *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, Char wrote: 'J'écris brièvement. Je ne puis guère *m'absenter* longtemps', (*OC*, p.182). This testifies to his commitment to active participation in the world, yet he also repeatedly insists that poetry is a solitary activity. In this, he is following Plato's concern with the unsayable, with the unutterable in the 'soundless dialogue with myself', a concern which also preoccupied such 'substantial allies' of Char as Braque and Heidegger, as well as Hegel, who in this respect at least is a major precursor for Char.<sup>10</sup> Yet while both Char and Heidegger concur tangentially with Plato's thought, they ultimately find his metaphysical project just as antipathetic as Aristotle's investigations into 'first principles' which laid the foundations for the modern science and technology that both found so worrying.

As Char once wrote: 'La poésie est la solitude sans distance parmi l'affairement de tous, c'est-à-dire une solitude qui a le moyen de se confier', (*OC*, p.742); as Heidegger asserted in *Gelassenheit* (1959), thinking is 'coming-into-the-nearness of distance'.<sup>11</sup> These two statements indicate that both situate separation (from the present, but, more importantly, from the past) at the heart of their creative enterprises. In other words, emotion, especially the sense of loss, must be inscribed functionally within any act of thinking. Throughout their works, both lament the decline (Heidegger's *Verfall*) from an originary *logos*, and so have been described as writers of nostalgia, though they might be better defined as poets of the Time Between, as Heidegger described Hölderlin – poets of the time between the departure (and/or the failure) of the gods and their return. Heidegger has famously spoken of language as 'the house of being',<sup>12</sup> in which all meaning and meaningfulness reside. This metaphor is drawn from an important concept in Empedocles' thinking, and it is significant that Char chose as one of the epigraphs to the 1945 edition of *Le Marteau sans maître* (The Hammer without a Master) the following fragment from Empedocles: 'J'ai pleuré, j'ai sangloté à la vue de cette demeure inaccoutumée',<sup>13</sup> for he too holds that language is our primal home to which we must constantly strive to return. In a 1965 interview, he

stated: 'What is clear is that words must allow us, must spur us to enter the land [of first Being]: if this does not happen, the written word cannot become a poem.'<sup>14</sup> Words both permit and force us towards a return to 'first Being':

Je suis contre le 'péché originel', mais il n'empêche que cela correspond à quelque crime inconnu et déchirant: Il y a eu un moment où, pour l'homme, tout était possible; et puis il s'est passé... quoi? En tout cas, un avortement et qui se répète.<sup>15</sup>

Char's vocabulary here of original sin and abortion is more violent than Heidegger's *Verfall* (which can, however, be translated by fall, downfall, or ruin as well as by decline), but they undoubtedly share a sense that mankind's fall is bound up with the loss of authentic language.

The other epigraph to *Le Marteau sans maître* is from Heraclitus: 'Il faut aussi se souvenir de celui qui oublie où mène le chemin'.<sup>16</sup> Again there are interactive resonances with Heidegger's work, notably with *Holzwege*,<sup>17</sup> whose title refers to forest paths which lead nowhere and suddenly, inexplicably stop (in many cases, these are fire-breaks or lumbermen's trails). Nonetheless, these paths which lead 'nowhere' may in fact lead us to the *Lichtung*, to the clearing in our existence, and for both thinkers, the path (though not just any path) is always multiple. Wandering is essential and is associated with a primal state of engagement with existence: Char entitled a volume of poems written between 1936 and 1937 and dedicated to the innocent children of Spain who were being killed in the Spanish Civil War, *Placard pour un chemin des écoliers*, which is usually, if inadequately, translated as 'Sign towards the long way round'. The 'chemin des écoliers' refers to the long, meandering route which children often choose rather than going there directly; in other words, this 'chemin' hopes to go nowhere, except to 'l'école buissonnière', and represents a rejection of the societal authority of 'logical', linear thinking. Above all, poetry is the sign-post to this path, to this 'Holzweg', an encouragement to wander.

The hope (the fantasy?) of a return to the original house of language and the commitment to wandering, in order – possibly – to discover a clearing, are, for both Char and Heidegger, inextricably linked to a concern with the potentiality of language, to a conviction that language does not necessarily have to (indeed should not) function rationally or logically. For Heidegger, language or the 'life of speech' constantly interacts disruptively with systematic thinking by revealing or, at least, gesturing toward the irreducible Other that can never be fully appropriated or assimilated by what modern Western philosophy terms 'rationality'.<sup>18</sup>

## The problems of 'logos' and 'Logos'

What initially drew Char and Heidegger together and made possible their friendship was a fascination with the pre-Socratics, whose philosophy is expressed poetically, figuratively. Both of these modern thinkers look to a past before the installation of what we now accept as the orthodoxy of Western metaphysics: the insistence on the principles of identity and non-contradiction, and on oppositional, binary systems. They both also continually refer explicitly or allusively to the questioning of identity and sameness that has operated in Western thought from Heraclitus's 'One never steps twice into the same river', through Descartes's *Cogito* and the work of his Occasionalist disciples to Gertrude Stein's moving and disquieting line in *Sacred Emily*, 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', to Heidegger's interrogations of sameness and difference, and to Derrida's construction or revelation of *différance*. Identity is never single; it is – and simultaneously it is not – oneness; the path to oneness is one of the *Holzwege* which lead nowhere. Oneness is a modern, and notably post-Socratic and post-Aristotelian invention.

How then to think or write today? The title of one of the most important essays in *Holzwege* is 'Wozu Dichter?' (given the French title 'Pourquoi des poètes?'). Heidegger's programmatic use of a question borrowed from Hölderlin questions the need for questions (while also imposing interrogation as an essential mode of relating to metaphysical concerns), and so urgently interrogates the ways in which we read and live (through) language. This essay is a call to engagement with ontology, as with poetry, as with history. It is also a challenge to the modern marginalization of poetry. It is a hopeful, optimistic presentation of how poetry may – and does – change our (readerly) existential relationship to the world, and of how poetry may reposition the reader as an active participant.

All of Char's writings follow a parallel and plural path. Despite his denials of the 'philosophical' aspects of his work, he repeatedly uses a term borrowed from Rimbaud: 'la pensée chantée' (sung thought). The poet is, for him, someone who sings thinking, who thinks through poetry, who engages in what Heidegger calls *das dichtendes Denken* (poeticizing thought): 'La poésie n'est pas formelle; elle est *dogme mystérieux* de la sensation, d'une *évidence-vérité* une fois pour toutes' (my emphasis).<sup>19</sup>

All of Char's thinking is grounded in a belief in what Rilke calls *Einsehen* (seeing-into). Passive reception is meaningless, a denial of our individual emotional, psychological, and cultural histories. Only by projecting ourselves into the Other, only by echoing actively and passively the 'irreducible Other's' voice, only by being simultaneously present and absent, 'the same' and 'different' as Heidegger would say, can we establish any sense of our *Dasein*, of our indwelling.



In an essay on the painter Zao Wou-Ki, Char writes: 'Et nous, réclamant notre part d'éloignement, nous ne sommes qu'en différence', (*OC*, p.594). However, we must always also be present in creative collaboration: 'Je ne suis pas séparé. Je suis *parmi*', (*OC*, p.587). Char insists on the value of the 'anterior echo' (*OC*, p.586), but goes on to affirm: 'Un bonheur de l'œuvre est de sentir s'éloigner d'elle ses proches d'un moment', (*OC*, p.586). Presence and absence, recognition and refusal, reception and donation: these are some of the polar oppositions which initially structure his thinking, oppositions which his writing then resolutely subverts, deconstructs.

Analogous subversions are to be found in Heidegger's thinking and especially in his *Gedachtes* poems. Inauthenticity and *Verfall*, the decline of *Dasein* into inauthenticity, must not for him be read solely through a prism of Christian dogmas and thus be judged on moral terms. Rather, *Verfall* is presented simply as a historical reality – and an active recognition of it will make manifest at least one aspect of the essential ontological structure of *Dasein* itself.

Heidegger may have been determined to think outside theology, but his discourse is saturated with theological terminology, hence the temptation to describe him as a 'language-mystic' or a 'meta-theologian'.<sup>20</sup> Like Char, he is absorbed in an etymological enterprise which seeks to re-hear and to re-use words in their originary sense(s), rather than striving simply to reassert the primacy of a 'first', historical meaning:

Words and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are. For this reason the misuse of language in idle talk, in slogans and phrases, destroys our authentic relation to things.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever language may be, whatever its powers may be, it is always a derivative and a function of the *logos*. The *logos* of the pre-Socratics (and especially of Heraclitus) is, for Heidegger, the 'collecting collectedness, the primal gathering principle'.<sup>22</sup> It is certainly not 'statement, the locus of truth as correctness',<sup>23</sup> as modern thinking has tended to make it. Less virulently anti-Catholic and anti-clerical than Char, Heidegger nonetheless also insists on the ways in which the Church Fathers have misread and mis-represented the pre-Socratic *logos* by focusing on St John's Gospel, which equates the *logos* with Christ, 'the Word made flesh'. This wilful misreading is, for Heidegger, a major example of the generalized and generalizing decline from the first beginning. Although he, like Char, is aware of the cultural force of the Genesis myth of Creation, to which St John's Gospel is a hermeneutic response, he is determined to remind us that the *logos* should be examined and understood in pre-Socratic terms and not in the

narrowly defining meaning accorded it (as a capitalized *Logos*, *Verbe*, or Word) by the doctrinal institutions of Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

If both Char and Heidegger prefer to describe each of their various chosen precursors as a thinker ('un penseur'; 'ein Denker') rather than as a philosopher, it is because they are vehemently (and in Char's case, angrily) opposed to any thinking that is subservient to the modern, post-Socratic, technocratic obsession with order and 'logic' (which is itself a drastic – and symptomatic – falling away from the authentic meaning of *logos*). As Char wrote during the War: 'Le poète ne peut pas longtemps demeurer dans la stratosphère du Verbe. Il doit se lover dans de nouvelles larmes et pousser plus avant dans son ordre', *OC*, p.180). In other words, we must strive both to refind and to live once more with and within *logos*, but in order also to move forwards to a more authentic future. This paradox is at the heart of the anxious and interrogative meditations of Char and Heidegger on history, even if their conclusions are different, since Char is more emotional and more relational and Heidegger more concerned with the ontological possibility of a history of history.<sup>25</sup>

One of the main convergences between their work occurs in their attitude to origins (to the problematics of aesthetic and ontological origin rather than biological origin).<sup>26</sup> In 'The origin of the work of art', Heidegger argues that the artist is the origin of the work of art and that the work is the origin of the artist – and, crucially, that, while interdependent, both are preceded by the phenomenon and the concept of art. In phenomenological terms, two origins are justifiable: 1) natal origin, or origin as cause; 2) nuptial origin, or the presence-as-revelation of what is always already present. For Heidegger, the functioning of a work does not consist in the taking-effect of a cause, but consists of a change, of an *aletheia* (in the sense of an unveiling), whereby art is 'the becoming and happening of truth, a setting-into-work of truth'.<sup>27</sup> And the 'nuptiality' of art may, will perhaps always, involve the violence of which Char speaks, hence the need to accept that authentic language is always 'la parole en archipel' (this is the title of a volume written by Char between 1952 and 1960).

In his 'Réponses interrogatives à une question de Martin Heidegger' (1966), Char writes: 'La poésie sera "un chant de départ". Poésie et action, vases *obstinément* communicants', (*OC*, p.734; my emphasis is intended to alert readers to Char's consciously agonistic relationship with Breton's over-determining Surrealist concept of intercommunicating vessels). But what is the necessary departure in and of poetry? A departure from the present or from the past? from the self or from the physical presence of others? from action to thinking? from denotational language to a figuring language? Char himself offers some answers, which simultaneously converge with and deviate from the arguments advanced by Heidegger in 'The origin of the work of art':

L'action est aveugle, c'est la poésie qui voit. [ ... ] La poésie est la loi, l'action demeure le phénomène. [ ... ] La poésie est le mouvement pur ordonnant le mouvement général. Elle enseigne le pays en se décalant. [ ... ] La poésie [ ... ] songe l'action et, grâce à son matériau, construit la Maison, mais jamais une fois pour toutes. La poésie est le moi en avant de l'en soi, 'le poète étant chargé de l'Humanité' (Rimbaud). La poésie serait de 'la pensée chantée'. Elle serait l'œuvre en avant de l'action, serait sa conséquence finale et détachée. La poésie est une tête chercheuse. L'action est son corps. Accomplissant une révolution ils font, au terme de celle-ci, coïncider la fin et le commencement. Ainsi de suite selon le cercle. (OC, p.735)

He clearly considers poetry to be 'the law', a form of the *logos* which precedes and regulates discrete actions yet, in his series of affirmations, he not only refers to crucial pre-Socratic concepts (law, pure movement, circle, etc.) and to Heidegger's notion of 'the house of language', but also incorporates reference to the coincidence of Alpha and Omega which is one of the main foundations of Christian thinking. This last inclusion in no way means that Char was being tempted by the dogmas of the Christian Church; rather, he was seeking to uncover the occulted (or, rather, the occluded) dependence of Christian thought on 'pagan', pre-Socratic thinking.

Heidegger's perspective on language and the *logos* is expressed in terms of a decline or an amnesia (the forgetting of Being), yet he, too, frequently alludes to the discourse of Christian dogma, notably defining philosophy as folly or foolishness and thereby inverting the New Testament and the Kierkegaardian concepts of the essential, creative 'foolishness' of the questions posed by Christ in his parables and in his responses to the Scribes and the Pharisees. In many ways close to Erasmus's notion of folly, Heidegger's ontological conception of past and present philosophy and poetry as positive forms of 'das dichtendes Denken' is nonetheless repeatedly presented as extra-theological. Christ as the *logos* is more of an immediate, (ant)agonistic problem for Char than for Heidegger, but Heidegger's post-theological project – with all of its engagements with the messianism of Nietzsche, Marx, and even Freud as well as with the scriptural texts of Christianity – does interrogate the ontological status of dogmatic texts: his paradigm of Being and his analysis of the split between Being and being(s) both depend on an assumption or, at least, a pre-supposition that 'Being' (*Sein*) can, must ultimately be equated with God or 'God'.

The prospective programmes of Char and Heidegger are grounded in retrospective and retroactive readings, and throughout their various works they both foreground, albeit with different agendas and with different anxieties, references to Judeo-Christianity – which remains the founding, and indeed determining, discourse of modern Western culture. These two poetic thinkers constantly engage in a

simultaneous exploitation and explosion of binary oppositions, since they feel it important to expose the inadequacies of Aristotelian philosophy in order to draw us back to an awareness of pre-Socratic thinking. Yet even here binary play can be used operatively: Heidegger opposes and conjoins the 'poetic thinking' of Parmenides and Heraclitus with 'the thinking poetry of the Greeks', in order to conclude, with a certain regret, that 'the thinking has priority'.<sup>28</sup>

Heidegger asserts that 'along with German the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and most spiritual of all languages'.<sup>29</sup> The privileging of German might, of course, support the political readings of Bourdieu and Farias, but it is at least equally important to remember that Heidegger reads pre-Socratic texts in Greek as well as in various translations – which he justifiably sees as misreadings. A major example is Parmenides' maxim *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, which is usually translated as: 'Thinking and being are the same.' According to Heidegger, this 'became the guiding principle of Western philosophy only when it ceased to be understood because its original truth could not be held fast', the original meaning being: 'There is a reciprocal bond between apprehension and being.'<sup>30</sup> However, the pre-occupation with (linguistic and philosophical) origin does not testify to a desire to locate a single originating moment; rather, it involves a remembering of the essential mobility and nuptial becoming of origin:

Men can retain basic truths of such magnitude only by raising them continuously to a still more original unfolding; not merely by applying them and invoking their authority. The original remains original only if it never loses the possibility of being what it is: origin as emergence (from the concealment of the essence).<sup>31</sup>

Char's position is analogous, albeit expressed in terms of poetry and with allusive references to Heraclitus, rather than to Parmenides:

La poésie ne se traduit pas dans la langue rigide de la logique. C'est une langue *originale* et constituée par les événements *transmués*.<sup>32</sup>

Dans le poème, chaque mot ou presque doit être employé dans son sens originel. Certains, se détachant, deviennent plurivalents. Il en est d'amnésiques. La constellation du Solitaire est tendue. (OC, p.378)

Le mot passe à travers l'individu, définit un état, illumine une séquence du monde matériel; propose aussi un autre état. Le poète ne force pas le réel, mais en libère une notion qu'il ne doit point laisser dans sa nudité autoritaire. (OC, p.743)

In his analysis of the first chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Heidegger insists on the ambiguity of the Greek term *deinon* (the terrible, the powerful, the violent, which he calls the *gewalt-tätig*), demonstrating how Greek discourse creatively cuts across the contending separations (*Aus-einander-setzungen*) of Being and being.<sup>33</sup> Yet neither his project nor that of Char is a narrow, scholarly exercise in etymology; it is a recognition of the potential of language to be constantly, prospectively originating. The *deinon* does not only dispose of power (*Gewalt*), but is violent insofar as the use of power is the basic trait not only of its action and operability, but of *Dasein* (both Heidegger and Char perceive violence not as arbitrary brutality, but as a form of the (pre-Socratic) *logos* which is a principle of existence).

The concern with ambiguity and with violence informs much modern Western thinking and poetry, yet it is essential to remember that both Char and Heidegger conceive of artistic creation, philosophy, and speculation as acts of custodianship: throughout their respective writings, they use terms such as 'gardien' and 'Verwalter'. Yet they both return constantly to the question of the place, the need(s), and the function of the Other – who is always past, present, and future.

In this respect, both find inspiration in the work of the pre-Socratics. For Heraclitus, conflict is the grounding principle of becoming; for Empedocles, catastrophe is the foundation of creation and creativity; for Parmenides, reciprocity can exist and function only within a circle of recognized and actively accepted violence. These gnomic ideas have been marginalized by many modern Western philosophers (although in other domains Freud and René Thom have used them as the basis for the elaboration of their respective theories of creativity and catastrophe). However, both Char and Heidegger inscribe these ideas firmly, explicitly in their writings – and thus propose a creative form of etiology which will incorporate and foreground the need for an eschatology that is, but is not only, Judeo-Christian. If we believe in God/gods (or in the need for gods), we are yearning towards a conjunction of the known and the unknown, of the material present and the past that we can imagine and/or fantasize.

All poetry, indeed all 'dichtendes Denken', is about a passionate, if sometimes despairing, relationship with the world – and with Being. In Char's case, this relationship involves anger as well as tragic optimism. If he castigates humankind for its cowardice and lack of commitment to others, he also repeatedly uses images of growth: for instance, the chrysalis which will become a butterfly, the seed which will become a plant, or the flower which will become a fruit. Yet in the use of these images, there is always an awareness both of what Heidegger calls 'being-toward-death' and of the physical inevitability of death – which can, though, like Goethe's butterfly be transfigured in the candle-flame in the very moment of extinction. Hence Char's abiding fascination with Georges de la Tour's candle-lit paintings, notably those of

Mary Magdalen wherein the salvation or recuperation of the most important Biblical 'fallen woman' is imaged by her gazing inwards/outwards/upwards by the light of a candle.

Although the poet is the 'conservateur des visages infinis du vivant' (OC, p.195), the presence or, more accurately, the undertow of death informs much of Char's thinking and poetry and must be assimilated into all readings of his work:

Nous passerons de la mort imaginée aux roseaux de la mort vécue  
nûment. La vie, par abrasion, se distrait à travers nous.

*La mort ne se trouve ni en deçà, ni au delà. Elle est à côté, industrielle,  
infime.* (OC, p.482)

Faire un poème, c'est prendre possession d'un au-delà nuptial qui se  
trouve bien dans cette vie, très rattaché à elle, et cependant à proximité  
des urnes de la mort. (OC, p.409)

Comment me vint l'écriture? Comme un duvet d'oiseau sur ma vitre,  
en hiver. Aussitôt s'éleva dans l'âtre une bataille de tisons qui n'a pas,  
encore à présent, pris fin. (OC, p.377)

This last statement is particularly important, for it contains an allusion to a crucial event in his childhood: Char told me in an interview in 1977 that his main memory of his vigil over his dying father was 'la bataille de tisons dans la chambre de mon père'. In other words, out of death can come transformation, even transfiguration, but these metamorphoses are made possible by and through language.

If both Char and Heidegger repeatedly meditate on death, they equally feel the world with a rare intensity and concreteness. For them, seeing and feeling authentically is a necessary first step towards the establishment of a sense of being-in-the-world, indwelling, *Dasein*. And in order to communicate this sense, one needs to use 'authentic' language and, moreover, to use it 'authentically', that is to say, violently. Much has been written about the difficulty of their respective discourses, and it is undeniable that both manipulate vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Their projects are similar: they seek to remind us of – and to re-inscribe us in – the language used by the pre-Socratics to express the *logos*, and to avoid an exclusionary, highly technical lexicon. Furthermore, if they engage in etymological explorations, this is no elitist activity. Rather, their aim is to use simple words – which are powerful precisely because they contain, indeed *are*, echoes of originary human perception. The 'difficulty' experienced in reading their texts arises not from our lack of knowledge of Greek or Latin nor from the grammatical deviations in their texts, but from our

*forgetting* of the pre-'philosophical' world, wherein lies primary (or primal) authenticity.

Steiner describes Heidegger's discourse as having and being 'a kind of violent ordinariness'.<sup>34</sup> The same can be said of Char's poetry and of his aesthetic thinking. Yet this 'violent ordinariness' is in no way aggressive; it is an attempt to return us to a pre-scientific, pre-technological era, so that we may be enabled thence to project ourselves into a future that is not governed by the tyrannies of narrow, 'logical', 'necessary' orthodoxies: 'La vraie violence (qui est révolte) n'a pas de venin. Quelquefois mortelle mais par pur accident. Échapper aux orthodoxies. Leur conduite est atroce', (*OC*, p.755); 'La violence du jour m'est chère | Plus que la pierre qui t'endort', (*OC*, p.809).

The urgent question of the functional place of violence in modern moral, philosophical, and poetic thinking needs to be addressed more fully,<sup>35</sup> but I would here insist on the fact that the preoccupation with gratitude underpins the thinking of Heidegger and Char – and, of course, gratitude is an emotion grounded in an acceptance of chronological temporality, of the importance of the past, and of our debts to our precursors. Heidegger was fascinated by the seventeenth-century Pietist notion of *Denken ist Danken* (to think is to thank). This 'slogan', which reveals and uncovers links denied by post-Aristotelian epistemological philosophers, does not translate directly into French or any other Romance language. However, in 'Qu'il vive!', one of his simplest and most powerfully emotive poems about his native Provence, where old traditions still have force, Char writes: 'Dans mon pays, on remercie', *OC*, p.305). Thinking and thanking should not function purely oppositionally, in the way that, for example, poetry and action are posited as 'stubbornly communicating vessels'. Gratitude is a sign that one is in the present; it does not, though, necessarily mean that one is inexorably chained to the past.

### **A philosopher and (his) poetry**

Heidegger's *Gedachtes* poems are witnesses to a reversal of the influence that many critics have presupposed and imposed, in that he writes poems that bear the marks of Char's thinking, vocabulary, and imagery. His poems do not, however, merely translate Char's idiolect into German; they are repositionings, redefinings of Heidegger's own idiolect, they are examples of creative misprision. In his consideration of how Greek terms were incorporated into Roman thinking, Heidegger points out that even apparently literal translation is always *trans*-lation (in French, '*tra*-duction'), and ultimately a diminution (playing here with the displacement of the tonic accent in the German: '*übersetzen*' = translate, '*übersetzen*' = to ferry across):

*La pensée romaine reprend les mots grecs, sans l'expérience originale correspondant à ce qu'ils disent, sans la parole grecque. C'est avec cette traduction que s'ouvre, sous la pensée occidentale, le vide qui la prive désormais de tout fondement.*

*Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word. The rootlessness of Western thought begins with this translation.<sup>36</sup>*

The French translators of the *Gedachtes* sequence, François Fédier and Jean Beaufret (the latter being Heidegger's main French exegete and 'apologist' from the early 1950s onwards), are generally attentive to the importance both of translation-as-transformation and of thinking-as-thanking in the work of the two writers, yet they also undoubtedly read Heidegger through Char – as, it seems to me, Heidegger intended these poems to be read. After all, they were written for Char and publicly, 'officially' dedicated to him: 'Für René Char | in freundschaftlichem Gedenken'/'Pour René Char | pensant et repensant à lui en amitié'<sup>37</sup> (For René Char | as a token of my friendship). The themes are amongst the most frequent in Heidegger's philosophical work, yet he has also chosen themes that recur almost obsessively in Char's work: Zeit/Temps/Time; Wege/Chemins/Paths; Winke/Signes/Signs; Ortschaft/Site/Place; Cézanne/Cézanne/Cézanne; Vorspiel/Prélude/Overture; Dank/Reconnaissance/ Thanks (*Gedachtes*, p.172 and p.173). These poems bear witness to a desire and a need to use language as it was used before the 'decline', to use it as it *is* authentically and not as the Western tradition has tended to use it, to use German in poems as Char uses French in poems, to re-present language (*vor-stellen*). The creativity of fragmentation and of fragmentary discourse that is the foundation of authentic poetry, but that post-Aristotelian philosophers have chosen to ignore or at least put under erasure, is rehabilitated – in and through further strategies of fragmentation, Being emerges as *aletheia*. It is not possible here to analyse each of Heidegger's *Gedachtes* poems, showing how virtually every line echoes specific lines and specific images from Char's work. One example will have to suffice – the last paragraph of 'Cézanne':

Zeigt sich hier ein Pfad, der in ein Zusammengehören des Dichtens und  
des Denkens führt?

Un sentier s'ouvre-t-il ici, qui mènerait à une commune présence du  
poème et de la pensée? (*Gedachtes*, p.182 and p.183)

'Commune présence' (*OC*, pp.80-81) is the title of a poem Char published in 1934 in *Le Marteau sans maître*. This text articulates an anxiously melancholic meditation on the co-existence within himself of his desiring need to be a poet (as a hymner of beauty



and 'le merveilleux') and of a drive to cruel, angry judgement, of an undertow of inhumanity. When Heidegger's essay 'The origin of the work of art' was going through various drafts of translation into French, his recurrent phrase 'das allgemeine Wesen der Dinge' (the thing's general essence) was initially and 'correctly' translated as 'l'essence universelle des choses' (the universal essence of things). However, several translators then suggested that it should be translated as 'commune présence' – in homage to Char. This is a gross error of understanding (of both poetic thinkers), yet it does lead us to question how translation can function – ie. not only as a form of mediated communication or as a diminution, but also as a substitution of a late-come authority for a first-come authority.

Sensitive to this problem, Heidegger insisted that Brokmeier should, in his French version of *Holzwege*, correct previous translations and attend to the specificity of Heideggerian discourse rather than (over-) privileging that of Char. However, he approved of Brokmeier's use of a central Charian concept – and title of a section of *Recherche de la base et du sommet* – in the French translation of 'Wozu Dichter?' ('Pourquoi des poètes?'), where Heracles, Dionysus, and Christ are presented as 'trois alliés substantiels'.<sup>38</sup> This acceptance of the informing presence of Char's work is further demonstrated in 'Cézanne'. Here the reference is not to Char's 1934 poem, but to Char's self-selected anthology of 1964 bearing the title 'Commune présence' which brings together different voices from four decades of his writing, hence Heidegger's 'Zusammengehören'.

Albeit in somewhat differing ways, Heidegger and Char both believed in and re-presented the flux of the pre-Socratics (what Wallace Stevens called the 'fluent mundo'). They also shared a commitment to the unveiling through poetic language of truth, which is 'a fitting to things, a correspondence (*Übereinstimmung*) with things',<sup>39</sup> and a desire to write – belatedly but essentially – in a mode that challenges the binary oppositional mechanics of modern Western metaphysics.

So where is philosophy? Clearly, for Heidegger, not only in the systematic thinking of *Being and Time* or in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* where he launches a fierce assault on Darwinism and its explanation of becoming, which he sees as inferior to the poetic theories of the pre-Socratics, or even in the more interrogative and meandering *Holzwege*. It lies also in a poetry which is an authentic, primal, primary 'pensée chantée', which uses terms that presuppose that the concrete contains the abstract, and, conversely, that the abstract can be communicated only through (poetic) images of concreteness.

All of Char's work testifies to his belief in poetry-(as)-philosophy, just as all of Heidegger's work testifies to his commitment to philosophy-(as)-poetry. Each

responded to the other's work, Char in his prose meditations on the implications of Heidegger's thought and Heidegger, most notably, in the *Gedachtes* sequence of poems. I would therefore conclude by suggesting that, after their first meeting, each advanced his personal project dialectically. However, this dialectic-through-friendship should not be seen in narrowly Hegelian terms, since the creative outcome in Heidegger's poems is not merely a function of an inevitable *Aufhebung*, but results equally from a (late-come) choice of the questioningly fragmentary discourse of poetry – in which poetry is given both historical and a historical priority.

Poetry may indeed be as primary as anthropologists tell us it is. In the late twentieth century, poetry conceived and written as radically subversive may thus remain (and necessarily be re-used and constantly rewritten as) the most authentic means of communication. Perhaps Heidegger's impulse to write his *Gedachtes* sequence derived from a desire (or a need) to respond to a friend's work – and to respond in his friend's terms. Perhaps Char was aware in his last works of the influence on his thinking of his encounters with Heidegger. We need as readers to alert ourselves constantly to the exciting, if worrying, questions posed by writer-thinkers who refuse to be categorized as either poets or philosophers. Perhaps it is only by reading, using, and thinking through poetic metaphors that we can establish, individually and collectively, an ontological, metaphysical, and socio-political sense of being.

## Notes

1. This is a revised version of my article 'Where is Philosophy? What is Poetry? Char and Heidegger', published in *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies* 2, 1993, pp.373-93.
2. George Steiner. *Heidegger*, London, Fontana/Collins, 1978, pp.12-13 (my emphasis); see also p.144.
3. For details of the most relevant works of these theorists, see the bibliography to the 'Introduction' of eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still, *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990; for details of other works examining intertextuality through the prism of power/gender politics, see the bibliography to the 'Introduction' of Judith Still and Michael Worton (eds.), *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993.
4. Paul Veyne. *René Char en ses poèmes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p.310. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French and German into English are my own.

5. René Char. *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard-Pléiade, 1983, pp.742-44. Where appropriate, all further references to Char's work will be to this volume, abbreviated as *OC*, and will be included in the text.
6. See 'Martin Heidegger: discours et proclamations', trans. Jean-Pierre Faye, *Médiations*, 3, 1961, 139-50.
7. Veyne, *René Char en ses poèmes*, p.309.
8. Cited in Veyne, *René Char en ses poèmes*, p.309
9. Pierre Bourdieu. *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger*, Paris, Minuit, 1988; Victor Farias, *Heidegger et le nazisme*, trans. from the Spanish and the German by Myriam Benarroch and Jean-Baptiste Grasset, Paris, LGF, 1989.
10. For further thoughts on solitude in philosophy, see Hannah Arendt, 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty', ed. Michael Murray, *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978, pp.293-303.
11. Martin Heidegger. *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John Anderson and E. Hans Freund, New York, Harper and Row, 1966, p.68. 36. Heidegger, 'Gedachtes'/'Pensivement' in the Char number of *L'Herne*, ed. Dominique Fourcade, 1971, p.170 & p.171. All references to Heidegger's poems, followed by their French translations, will be given in the text, and signalled as *Gedachtes*.
12. Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper and Row, 1971, p.132.
13. René Char. *Le Marteau sans maître*, Paris, José Corti, 1980, p.11.
14. René Char. 'Poésie-sur-Sorgue – Interview avec Edith Mora', *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 16 September 1965, p.9.
15. René Char. 'Poésie-sur-Sorgue', p.9.
16. René Char. *Le Marteau sans maître*, p.11.
17. Martin Heidegger. *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1950. The French translation by Wolfgang Brokmeier is appropriately entitled *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962. The title of the (partial) English translation,

*Poetry, Language, Thought*, does not convey the sense of wandering that is crucial to Heidegger's thinking.

18. See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.208.

19. 'Une matinée avec René Char – Interview avec Jacques Charpier', *Combat*, 16 February 1950, p.4.

20. See Steiner, *Heidegger*, p.11.

21. Martin Heidegger. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p.11.

22. *ibid.*, p.108.

23. *ibid.*, p.158.

24. For a forceful example of Heidegger's assault on the deterioration of the meaning of *logos*, see *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp.106-13.

25. For an excellent analysis of Heidegger's positions, see David Couzens Hoy. 'History, Historicity and Historiography in *Being and Time*', ed. Murray, *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, pp.329-53.

26. For a fine and generously provocative study of aesthetics and ontology, see Reiner Schürmann. 'Situating René Char: Hölderlin, Heidegger, Char, and "There is"', ed. William V. Spanos, *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: Towards a Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, pp.173-94.

27. See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.17.

28. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp.121-22.

29. *ibid.*, p.47.

30. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.122.

31. *ibid.*, p.122.

32. 'Entretien de René Char avec France Huser', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 799, 3 March 1980, p.111 (my emphasis).

33. See Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, pp.123-27.

34. See Steiner, *Heidegger*, p.84.

35. For a series of recent speculations on the functional place of violence in literature and thought, see eds. Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Timothy Mathews, *Théorie, violence, surréalisme*, Collection Pleine Marge, Paris, Lachenal et Ritter, 1993.

36. Heidegger, 'L'origine de l'œuvre d'art', in *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part*, 21; 'The origin of the work of art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 23. I give the French translation as well as the English translation, because it more accurately mimes (within the specificity of its own difference) the moves of Heidegger's German and because the *mots/paroles/ce qu'ils disent* triad clearly shows how Heidegger's thought has been thought through – and thought into – Char's discourse by the French translator.

37. Heidegger, 'Gedachtes'/Pensivement' in the Char number of *L'Herne*, ed. Dominique Fourcade, 1971, p.170 & p.171. All references to Heidegger's poems, followed by their French translations, will be given in the text, and signalled as *Gedachtes*.

38. *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* Heidegger, p.323. The English translation of 'Wozu Dichter?' bears no mark of Char's discourse, describing Heidegger's trinity only as 'the "united three"' (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, p.91). In his 'Alliés substantiels', Char focuses mainly on modern visual artists, thereby interrogating both the Platonic fear of (subversively) mimetic artists and the Hegelian hierarchical differentiation between poets and painters (see *OC*, pp.671-708). Char's conception of 'alliés substantiels' arises from – and subsequently, necessarily, determinedly programmes – a speculation on how presence is always (and can be presented as) the presentness of the past, and thus involves the reader in an urgent interrogation of what presence actually is, of how modern society marginalizes 'pure', ontological presence.

39. Martin Heidegger. *What is a thing?*, trans. W.B. Barton and V. Deutsch, New York, Twayne, 1958, p.36.