

The Birth of Philosophy in Poetry: Blanchot, Char, Heraclitus

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1. Blanchot at the Crossing Point

i

At its dawn in the West when philosophy had not discovered what Blanchot calls its “official language,” there came a new kind of singer, a vagrant, who wandered from district to district singing a new kind of song (*The Infinite Conversation* 7). The song, yet to adopt the “language of continuity,” enacted – incarnated – Blanchot tells us, a kind of thinking. Those who listened to Xenophon, one of these itinerant singers, heard a language that had already foresworn the gods, questioning their authority and questioning language. The listeners to Xenophon’s hexameters, elegiacs and iambs as well as the oracular and deliberately ambiguous aphorisms of Heraclitus, Blanchot tells us, “were present at a very strange event: the birth of philosophy in poetry” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 58). At the crossing point, when philosophy had yet to become itself, there flashed up a way of thinking that would thereafter appear to belong to another era. Blanchot argues that this non-continuous and non-official not-yet-philosophical thinking flashes up again millennia later in the poetry of René Char. The thought of Heraclitus and Xenophon has not been superseded because it is not surpassable; it is not archaic because it does not belong to the development of philosophy or science. For Blanchot, Char’s poetry *thinks* in a way that not only recalls us to pre-Socratic thought, but shows how the crossing point opens before us here and now. My aim is to understand the stakes of this opening; how philosophy, born from poetry, could be born from poetry anew.

ii

For Blanchot, Heraclitus accomplishes a turn, a movement from one kind of discourse, associated with the names of gods and goddesses to another, associated with more obscure forces. Heraclitus brings new emphasis to a handful of words – *Helios* (the sun), *keranos* (lightning), *logos* (reason, speech, account, word), *nomos* (custom or law), *pur* (fire) and of course *phusis* (nature) – simple words that, with his fragments, disclose a profound dimension.^[1] It is to the turn that happens with Heraclitus, the abandonment of cosmogony, the attempt to draw back all thought – poetry, philosophy — to the *logos*, that Blanchot traces the invention of new discourses of nature. “Sacred speech becomes the discourse of *phusis*”; we discern an

inchoate natural science in the claim that the ever-living *kosmos* is a modification of eternal fire, but this discourse has not yet hardened into a certain continuous speech (*The Infinite Conversation* 86).^[2] The thinker who tells us, as Plutarch reports, that “all things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods” has not yet produced a systematic science; we are a long way from the pages of Aristotle (see Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* 123).

There is, Blanchot avers, “a very lofty play of writing” in the work of this thinker (*The Infinite Conversation* 87). “One should know that war is common, that justice is strife, that all things come about in accordance with strife and with what must be”; “Combinations – wholes and not wholes, concurring differing, concordant discordant, from all things one and from all one things” (*Early Greek Philosophy* 114); as Aristotle reports, “Heraclitus says that opposition concurs and the fairest connection comes from things that differ and that everything comes about in accordance with strife” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155b2-6).

How can we read these difficult sentences? Plato distrusts a writing that would bear no personal guarantee — a certain sacred speech, in which the singer, inspired, is turned over to impersonal forces over which he can exert little control.^[3] Heraclitus’s words are inspired in the sense not because they simply slip beyond their referents, the humble things, leaving them behind. According to Blanchot, a primordial “Difference” or “Duality” reveals itself in Heraclitus’s writing, a strife not between two symmetrical orders but between *phusis* and itself, disclosing in things they bring forward a reserve (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 87). Heraclitus permits the things themselves to resonate with this reserve in its power to name, indicating what governs or steers the coming-into-appearance, the “to be” of the things in question.

In so doing, Heraclitus also permits a parallel reserve to open in language. In one sense, Heraclitus would permit things to speak, reaffirming their exultant presence as what they are. In another sense, he brings words that refer back to a pre-linguistic determination, disclosing a materiality of language (in a manner that, I will argue, is analogous to Char). The wisdom of the aphorisms inheres in this materiality, one that disappears as soon as the message is sought above what will henceforward appear only as a medium. Wisdom – a different *sophon* than the one we associate with philosophy – reveals itself as what, precisely, cannot be translated out of Heraclitus’s language. If Heraclitus appears obscure this is because the wisdom his writing bears cannot grant itself to the measure of illumination.

The step from Xenophanes and Heraclitus to Plato – the step into philosophy in the West – is a step *through* what we might call poetry, a moment in which things spoke in a more primordial, concretized language to when language transformed itself in order to speak in turn.

As Aristotle confirms, the sensible world was, for Plato, one of Heraclitean flux; what he sought in the Forms were the ultimate objects of knowledge (see *Metaphysics* A987a 29). Socrates sought definitions; Plato, in the dialogues of his middle period, grants language a secure point of anchorage by providing their ground and the ground of knowledge. No longer need the philosopher resort to the materiality of language in order to indicate the materiality of things. Obscurity is banished by the light of the Form of the Good.

As we know, Plato distrusts writing; he would distrust the writing of Heraclitus because they would not provide his readers the personal guarantee of a speaker. Plato tells us that the written word cannot respond to questions or to objections; the philosopher only uses it as an aid to memory (though the written word, in general, is, according to retelling of the myth of Theuth a threat to memory [4]), or as *paidia*, as play or recreation. The discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*, indeed, is a game with *logoi* (*Phaedrus* 274d, 276e, 278b); Plato is himself a writer, but, aware of its risks, he would be a more responsible teacher. For someone without the theory of Forms, who has not driven the shadows away in advance, Heraclitus risks turning philosophy into a game. Yes, Plato also takes this risk, but he tells us in the *Phaedrus* that to write is to play: he tells us and thereby insures himself against misunderstanding. For Blanchot, however, it is not play we should fear. The ambiguities of Heraclitus's lofty play of writing, his playful wisdom maintains the invisibility of the invisible, of what hides itself from the light of Plato's Sun.

Nature, for Heraclitus, is twofold – but a sensible world is not divided from a supersensible one. Nature is dark and obscure; Heraclitean language, linked to it, is similarly dark, similarly obscure. The aphorism is not an ornament of a more developed philosophy, but answers to and incarnates the movement of a discontinuous thought; it does not let the difference in question slip into *in*-difference by pretending to lift language from the world, detaching it from the things and from its own materiality.

The fragments that have come down to us from Heraclitus can be said to bear witness to this experience not because he first underwent the original experience and then recounted it, but because it happens in and as his writing. This does not mean that the philosophy that triumphs after Heraclitus *does not think* since it, too, bears the marks of the thinking in question. However, poetry, modern poetry, is better able to attest to the experience of anxiety that occurs as Blanchovian thinking. The modern poem remembers what was lost at the inception of philosophy.

Writing of René Char, the twentieth century poet whose work he claims is “a revelation of poetry, poetry of poetry . . . poem of the essence of poem,” Blanchot argues we encounter a kind of thinking that was lost in the step into philosophy. Linking Char to Xenophanes and Heraclitus, Blanchot recovers another thought, a non-official way of thinking that attends to the disclosure of things as things, of phenomena as phenomena, of, in the broadest sense, nature (*Work of Fire* 100).

Blanchot recalls philosophy to the way of thinking it forewent as soon as it discovered its official language. Philosophy, born from poetry, discovered and lost a discontinuous way of thinking (of a thinking *as* discontinuity) at the moment of its birth, at the crossing point between poetry and itself. It is this discontinuous thought that Blanchot discovers anew in the poems of Char.

2. *The Poet to Come*

i

As Blanchot says, “nature has great power over his work”: René Char is famous for his celebrations of the landscape of Vaucluse, of L’Isle-sur-Sorgue, of the river Sorgue, the wood of the Epte, the summits of Montmirail, the Ventoux. But Char is not a bucolic poet.

J’avais dix ans. La Sorgue m’ench âssait. Le soleil chantait les heures sur le sage cadran des eaux. L’insouciance et la douleur avaient scellé le coq de fer sur le toit des maisons et se supportaient ensemble.

(from *Déclarer son nom*, *Oeuvres complètes* 401)

I was ten. The Sorgue enshrined me. The sun sang the hours upon the wise dial of the waters. Both sorrow and insouciance had sealed the weathercock onto the roof of the houses where, together, they stood propped.

(Trans. Gustaf Sorbin, *Selected Poems* 107)

The poem bears witness, as I will show through the *contradiction*.

Né de l’appel du devenir et de l’angoisse de la rétention, le poème, s’élevé de son puits de boue et d’étoiles, témoignera presque silencieusement, qu’il n’était rien en lui n’existât vraiment ailleurs, dans communitarian exigence rebelle solitaire monde des contradictions.

(from *Argument*, *Oeuvres complètes* 247)

Born from the summons of becoming and from the anguish of retention, the poem rising from its well of mud and stars, will bear witness, almost silently, that it

contained nothing which did not truly exist elsewhere, in this rebellious and solitary world of contradictions.

(Trans. Mary Ann Caws, *Selected Poems* 39)

There is a conflict – a self-conflict – in the Charian poem; sorrow and insouciance, mud and stars coexist in what Blanchot calls a “self-conflicting exaltation” that refuses reconciliation (“The Beast of Lascaux,” 58). The poem does not enclose that of which it writes, determining it, circumscribing it, but presents, through what Starobinski calls a “fought anxiety” (“René Char” 115) and Blanchot calls “division, vexation, torment” (*The Work of Fire* 101) an obscure depth. The restraint of the Charian poem is only apparent; its strong, simple language harbours the opening to which both commentators trace all of Char’s poetry. The poem indicates what the things of which Char writes shelter.

Char does not refer to nature, Blanchot writes:

in the sense of solid, earthy things, of the sun, the waters, the wisdom of men that endure, not even simply in the sense of all things, the universal whole, the infinity of the cosmos, but in what is already there before “all,” the immediate and the remote, what is more real than all real things and forgets itself in each thing, the bond we cannot bind, and by which everything, the whole, is bound. (“The Beast of Lascaux” 57)

Nature is not to be in terms of those notions of nature that would be simply opposed to the distinctive customs, achievements, products and outlook of a particular society or group. Nor does it denote the object of investigation of the natural sciences, that is, the natural or physical world as it is explored by physics, chemistry or biology. To what then does nature, for Blanchot, refer?

ii

Blanchot’s notion of nature and poetry draw upon the reflections on being and *phusis* in the work of Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* produced a “veritable intellectual shock” in the young Blanchot (see “*Penser l’apocalypse*” 3). For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, nature seems to be encountered first and foremost in the tool – for example, in the wood and metal of the hammer (“hammer, tongs, and nail refer in themselves to steel, iron, metal, minerals, wood”) (*Being and Time* 100). Nature is utilised; it is discovered as stock (*Bestand*) (“the wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock, the river is water-power, the wind is wind ‘in the sails’”) that we would put to use in service of some goal or another (*Being and Time* 100). *Being and Time*, prosaically retracing notions of nature back to what

subsists in our tools or waiting to be employed as stock hints at an understanding of nature as a power that “stirs and thrives” (*Being and Time* 100).

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger argues that it is the work of art that “sets itself back (*sich zurückstellt*) into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and lustre of metal, into the brightening of colour, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power (*Nennkraft*) of the word” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 171). Nature, for him, is no longer captured by utility; art, by contrast, reveals what cannot be so deployed. Nature is thought by Heidegger as “earth” and it is not by coincidence that Blanchot negotiates “The Origin of the Work of Art” (or at least Alphonse de Waelhens’s account of this essay that hovers behind Blanchot’s essays on the early 1950s (see *Le philosophie de Martin Heidegger*) through a reading of Char.^[5] Writing of the “shifting earth, horrible exquisite,” Blanchot retains a thought of nature as that which both grants and conceals itself as what offers itself and denies itself to utilisation and this provides a clue as to how one might approach his account of nature as what dissimulates or “forgets” itself in the real (*The Space of Literature* 274). But Blanchot counterposes not a contexture of tools, to some earthy reserve; rather, the sun, the waters, the whole of nature is encountered in terms of what withdraws in them, of what outstrips them even as it disappears, as it were, into them. To what, then, does he point?

As for Heidegger, the experience of nature in question is linked to a certain experience of the origin. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot tells us that the work of art “is always original and at all moments a beginning” – it appears, first of all, to be “ever new, the mirage of the future’s inaccessible truth”: it shimmers before us, seeming to promise a truth that never finally arrives (*The Space of Literature* 229). Second, its novelty, this “new ‘now,’” he writes, “renews this ‘now’ which it seems to initiate”; welling up now, happening now, it disrupts the reigning order of experience. And third, Blanchot tells us, “it is the very old, frightfully ancient, lost in the night of time”; it precedes us, it is a thing of the past, but it returns, renewing our time and promising us a future (*The Space of Literature* 229). The original experience happens, as I will explain, as the happening of the work of art and in so doing, it remembers what is “forgotten” in the coming to presence of the real. The poem, by remembering, also renews our time by drawing on the future – not as the future that one might calculate or plan in advance, nor as the outcome of what is caused in the present, but what, from the perspective of plans and programmes, can only appear as a mirage.

At stake in Blanchot’s notion of nature is not the essence of the sun or the waters; it is not the essence of wisdom or the essence of all things, of the whole, but what precedes and allows this whole to open: “the immediate and the remote, what is more real than all real things and forgets itself in each thing, the bond we cannot bind, and by which everything, the whole, is bound” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 57). No, we cannot bind the

original experience; it is not ours as poets or as readers but exceeds us, offering itself neither as equipment nor as stock. It is to this excess that the poem points as the experience of nature – as the original experience, as what is remembered in its lines with an uncanny and, as I will show, transpersonal or communal memory. Such would be the stakes of Char’s poetry.

iii

I will focus on two poems of Char’s that belong to a sequence concerned with the paintings on the cavewalls of Lascaux. Here is the first, “*Les Cerfs Noir*,” “The Black Stags”:

*Les eaux parlaient à l’oreille du ciel.
Cerfs, vous avez franchi l’espace millénaire,
Des ténèbres du roc aux caresses de l’air.
Le chasseur qui vous pousse, le génie qui vous voit,
Que j’aime leur passion, de mon large rivage!
Et si j’avais leurs yeux, dans l’instant où j’espère? (59)*

(*Oeuvres complètes* 351)

The waters were whispering into the ear of the sky.
Stags, you leapt traversed millennial space,
From darkness of the rock to the air’s caresses.
The hunter who presses, and the spirit who sights you,
How I adore their passion from my own wide shore!
And perhaps their eyes are mine in the instant of hope?

(Trans. Gustaf Sorbin, *Selected Poems* 83)

The stags reach the poet not from another world but from this one, ages past, from a time when water and sky were bound up with another, when nature was whole. It is from this intimacy that the stags emerge. On the dark cavewalls they seem to float in mid air, transforming the heaviness of rock into the lightness of flight. They come towards him, the poet, from the depths of time, frozen by the painting of the ancient genius in a moment that holds together the water and the sky, the darkness of the cave and the bright air. The Lascaux painter captures the stags before the hunter could kill them, figuring their freedom and energy on the cavewall. The poet recognises the painter’s eyes that open covetously upon the fleet movement of the deer as an analogue of the hunter’s. The poet would seize the portrayal of the fleetness of the stag as it was itself seized by a primitive painter. But the poet – like the painter, like the hunter – cannot seize upon nature in its riven simplicity.

Is it this cleavage we find figured in the separation of poet, artist and hunter from their object? Nature, in itself, would be the reconciliation of opposites – the water would whisper to the sky. But with the irruption of the human being onto the scene, with the one who envies nature in its non-contradictory plenitude, a rift is torn open in this plenitude.^[6] Nature is double: the animals and plants appear against a backdrop of the reserve that nature also is; as Starobinski notices, Char's poetry

does not limit itself to the positive conquest of a vast horizon offered for contemplation. It apprehends negatively that which is taken from us. It arises from the dramatic contrast between a here and an elsewhere, between present dazzlement and unreachable ground against which it stands out. ("René Char" 114)

To claim that nature is twofold is not to make the withdrawal from a phenomenon a phenomenon itself; the ground does not make itself available as a phenomenon. But what then is this other sense of nature defined negatively, that shows itself, as it were, whilst slipping away? This is my guiding question, since it is, for Blanchot, the poet's achievement, especially the modern poet, René Char, who of the moderns presents the poem of the essence of the poem: to bring to presence this reserve that nature also is in terms of an experience of the origin.

iv

Blanchot's encounter with Char's poetry in the essay collected in *The Work of Fire* is couched in terms of a reading of Georges Mounin's book *Have You Read Char?* of which Blanchot approves because it maintains the "method and seriousness, the ardent patience and spirit of measurement" associated with the university (*The Work of Fire* 98). Mounin is certain and penetrating in his reading; he remains close to the movement he discovers in Char, one that offers itself up to his critical practice. Char's poetry, of course, cannot exist without a reader; at the same time, it withdraws from any particular reading, maintaining a reserve that the exigencies of literary history cannot uncover. But those same exigencies prevent Mounin's approach from attending to the happening of poetry. Mounin, man of the university, remains content with what for Blanchot is a hackneyed distinction between "inspiration" and "reflection," one that would seem to reproduce a familiar account of the relationship between matter and form.

This is why the movement of Char's poetry must elude Mounin – why, that is, his reading does not attend to the singularity of an encounter with the poem. It eludes him as a reader; he does not understand the process of its creation. The poet, Blanchot reminds us, is only born as a poet "by the poem he creates" (*The Work of Fire* 99). The poem is his work, Blanchot confirms – it is "the truest impulse of his existence," but it is so only insofar as unites what he calls, "the obscurity of the depths of the

earth” and “the clarity of a universal power to establish and justify” (*The Work of Fire* 99). The words inspiration and reflection – “awkward sketches”—have been renewed; inspiration no longer refers to a gift given or a secret vouchsafed to the one who would only thereafter begin to create, for the poet exists as a poet only with the writing of the poem (*The Work of Fire* 99).

The Blanchovian poet is, in this sense, “yet to come, still absent in the face of the poetic work that is itself all future and all absence” (*The Work of Fire* 99). To be inspired is to receive “the gift of existence” as a poet; but this gift demands a kind of *passivity* – a pre-voluntary openness to the original experience. In what does this experience consist? Blanchot declares a certain *anteriority* of the poem – the dependence on the part of the poet on what he would create. This does not bind the poem to a familiar determination of inspiration as an opening unto a heavenly realm, one that would grant it its force, its movement. No God, no Form of the Good lies behind the poetic event; no deity guarantees its emergence. Inspiration is not experience as a kind of joyous abundance, but awakens a kind of “anxiety” that is bound up with a peculiar “movement without beginning or end,” an agitation to which the poem always attests and awakens in its readers (*The Work of Fire* 101). This is not the existentialist’s anxiety before death. Such an anxiety might in turn permit one to assume one’s existence as one’s own. It is, as I will show, *transpersonal*, and to be associated with the inauthentic others with whom the existentialist is surrounded rather than the authentic self bound to itself by its relation to death. It is a function of a memory that opens the poet to the original experience.

I will organise this rewriting of inspiration around the traditional figure of inspiration:the Muse.

3. *Memory is the Muse*

In the sacred speech of the singer, Clark observes, “divine agency” blurs into “human skill”; the song issues from both the poet and the divine (*The Theory of Inspiration* 42). The song is both granted by the Muses and addressed to them, gathering the singer and his listeners into what Clark argues is “a communal event” (43). When the song is recited, poem and audience are carried to the “realm of myth, legend, fame”; that is, what Clark argues is “not so much the past as the realm of all meaning per se, of all that perdures in the space where the language of cultural self-definition continually speaks itself” (42). Thus the singer becomes the medium of the language of the origin, remembering what it is not in his power to remember, singing from memory, but depending, for the power to remember, on the Muse.

This is why Blanchot writes in “Forgetful Memory” that, classically, “memory is the muse” (*The Infinite Conversation* 314). What is important in the performance of the

singer is not the relating of an event for the first time, but a *retelling* that confirms the continuity and endurance of a divine order for the community of poet and listeners. The song – what is not yet called poetry – is entrusted with what Blanchot calls a “great impersonal memory” that reaches back to the origin of the gods themselves (*The Infinite Conversation* 314). The Muse permits the memory of this origin. Memory, exceeding the powers of singer or listener is *abyssal*, belonging to an obscurity that can never be brought to the light. It is from this abyssal reserve that the song is given. The Muse bestows the power to draw certain memories out of the forgetting into which they have slipped.

But memory is abyssal not only because of the remoteness of the events to which the singer would attest. Clark is right: the realm of myth, of legend and fame never simply belongs to the past; the song permits the transmission of an account of origin of the community. An oral tradition preserves the shared heritage such that, as Clark observes, it was only late in the fifth century B.C.E. that writing was used in Greece, despite the introduction of the Greek alphabet two hundred years previously (41). *Memory is the Muse*: in a pre-literate culture, the re-telling singer rejoins the community to the memory that is in the capacity of no individual to remember. The song permits the opening of the gulf between the present and the mythical past – between what exists before us, here and now and an account of what it was for things, nature itself and the gods themselves— to emerge.

In an essay in *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot tells us that there is an interval that divides origin from beginning. The origin, he writes, “secures us against obscurity but is itself obscure, either because it dissimulates itself or because, in doing so, it retains in itself the part of inhumanity that genealogies endeavour to make historical” (370). The singer sings of the origin of the gods, but there is a dissension of the origin. *Memory is the Muse*; but the memory of the song tears the temporal order of the community apart. The diurnal, lunar and yearly rituals, sowing and harvest, birth and death, war and peace take place in the light of a self-definition of a world, one that roots itself in a conception of its origin. The gods, in this sense, are also part of the world of this community – life and afterlife, chance and destiny: the community reassures itself of its world and perdures. But this same self-definition bears a fatal equivocation, since the song reveals and does not reveal nature as a whole. The song reveals what exists insofar as it exceeds the present determination of what exists.

Yes, *memory is the Muse*; but the memory of the song is too much to bear. Forgetting is also required; indeed, the opening of a world, the whole to this community demands a forgetting of the equivocation in question. This is why inspiration is dangerous: why it must always be associated with an anxiety that makes the community itself tremble. Singing is a communal event, but this event can never be guaranteed by placing it in

the mouth of the singer. The song *remembers too much*, permitting, in its happening, the opening of a depth whose profundity cannot be measured. The memory to which it attests is no longer borne by an individual; it appears (and this is why Plato is suspicious) without the guarantee of one who knows and remembers by bathing the past in the light of this knowledge. The things of which the song sings – nature itself – do not stand in the clear light of evidency; nature does not confine itself to the unity of a form and is not illuminated and judged by the light. The memory in question is, it is true, attested to within the song and from the mouth of the singer; it offers itself, to this extent, to determinacy, to form, but it is not in this way brought to lucidity.

Is it not the case that it exposes what is hidden in the very memorising of memory, that is, what holds itself back from what is permitted manifestation? The song exposes the way in which memory misleads us in giving us as immediate what is not immediate, as simple what is not simple. The light of memory is a false light not because there would be a truer memory, but because truth itself is dissimulated in its illumination. Memorising, conceived as the act of an individual, proposes itself as the model of memory, but does memory itself indirectly mediate a hyperbolic *forgetting*, one that does not take part in the economy of memory and forgetting?

How might one understand this claim? Clark reminds us that sung verse was, for the Greeks, “the very medium of cultural transmission, the sole guarantor of mediation between the ephemeral or immediate and the general life, history and posterity of the community” (41). Song is not used just for epics, but “by judges, principles and generals, to ensure maximum transmissibility of a message without loss” (41). But the poem also reveals the contexture of animals and plants, of “natural” phenomena like the sea and the sky, the day and the night, and “cultural” phenomena like forms of worship, notions of justice and rightness and wrongness. The memorising that happens with the song would not only reflect the existing world but provide an account of how it came into existence and is sustained there. Neither the singer nor his or her audience could rely on their individual memories to recall the opening and re-opening of their world as it is, that is the “how” of its coming to appear.

Individualised memory, the memory each of us bears in the first person, dissimulates a certain forgetting. What we are – not just you or me but all of us and our world, all the interrelated phenomena that are familiar to us in the “how” of their coming-to-appear – open out whilst keeping a certain reserve *in reserve*. There is a difference between our world in the light of its coming into appearance and the prior withdrawal to which the song would point. With its cosmogony, its story about origins, the song provides a figure for the ongoing struggle between illumination and darkness, for what is forgotten in the opening of the *kosmos* as itself. The Muse who is memory permits the composition of a poem that tells of more than the poet could remember. The poem accomplishes an excessive *anamnesis*, the excavation not of the ideas and

their light but of a darkness that Plato senses, one that cannot be remembered by an individual and whose memory does not permit us to remain intact as individuals. The Muse is memory, no doubt; but that which the song remembers is only *figured* in the account of chthonic forces. It would take thousands of years, on Blanchot's telling, for the song as the poem to reveal the origin of which the myth is a figure. Poetic writing had yet, for the ancients, to *come into its own*.

Only Heraclitus and Xenophon, proto-philosophers, by using the Greek language and, in the case of the former, writing and presenting his thought in terms of the lofty play of writing, hinted at what was to come. Perhaps it is possible to discern what they allowed to be born only when millennia had passed – when poetry presented itself, in the modern world, in its essence. To that extent, the texts of the “first” thinkers lie ahead of us, ever to come.

What does Char, who has already been called the poet to come, announce in his poetry? How does his poetry allow itself to be remembered concerning the origin of philosophy?

4. Forgetting is the Muse

The modern poem, of course, is no longer an aid to memory (how can it rival the written record?) and hereafter will never attain its central place in civic and religious life in Europe. Like the holy word, “what is written comes from no-one knows where, anonymous, without apparent origin, and therefore evoking an origin more remote” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 30). It comes to speak “like the divine voice of the oracle, where the god himself is never present in his words, it being only his absence which speaks” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 30). But what does the poem prophesise?

The modern poem is called into being when the poet writes of what it must, by writing, lose; language can be said to be revelatory, granting us the capacity to express ourselves as ourselves, to communicate only because its object slips away. The immediate cannot be grasped immediately; it is seized in its singularity and thereby mediated, surrendering to the power inherent to language. But it is the capacity to represent, to function and order that poetry calls into question. It is with modernity that poetry can be said to come into its own, designating its object in such a way that it exposes what is at stake in the very act of designation.

In order for a poem to be a poem – a thing of words – it must deploy language, thereby mediating and negating the thing it writes about. The thing in question can be anything at all (let us remember the list Heidegger provides – “the stone in the road,” “the well beside the road,” the cloud in the sky,” “the thistle in the field,” “the hawk over the wood” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 147)) – the poet can write of

animals and plants, of the sea and the sky, the day and the night, of forms of worship and notions of justice and rightness and wrongness.

The Blanchovian poet, however, would seize upon the very movement of negation, arresting and suspending it in order “to come into substantial and material contact with it” (*Work of Fire* 108). The poet hence bears witness to what it has already lost by attempting to become material and substantial. Poetic language answers to the presence of the lost thing in its absence, attempting to allow us to “attain it as the presence of an absence, calling, there inside us, for the most animated movement to possess it” through its resort to that which is syntactical, thing-like about language itself (*Work of Fire* 108). The poem is a thing of words, reproducing, through the sonority of language, the presence of the thing of which the poet writes. The thing in question is both idealised and recuperated in language (language cannot help but make sense) and presents what Blanchot calls “its reality of earth, its ‘matter-emotion (*matière-émotion*)’” (*Work of Fire* 108).

The anxiety to which we as readers of Char and to which Char himself responds is bound up with the attempt to possess the thing of which the poet writes through the metamorphosis of language. The written word, as Blanchot reminds us, is the “word of death, oblivion [*l’oubli*]” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 30). Char’s poems transform the word “into a silently pointing finger”; but to what do they point (“The Beast of Lascaux” 32)? To the earthiness of designated things – to the revelation of what is as what it is, of beings in their “to be” through the language of the poem.

Char’s poems transform the word into a silently pointing finger that indicates the earthiness of designated things – to the revelation of what exists through the language of the poem. The act of poetic designation, its extraordinary “capacity” to indicate, depends upon the poet’s resorting to the materiality of language – its earthiness. In order to reveal the thingness of things, the poem has to turn itself into something like a thing. It cannot close itself off from the dimension of sense entirely because it cannot become what it would designate. But the poem can nevertheless indicate what it is not; it can reveal the things of which it writes and, as it were, release their existence from the future because it seeks not to grasp them but to set them free against the backdrop of their coming to presence, their emergence as phenomena, as things.

The poem reveals the thingness of the thing, exhibiting things as things insofar as they exceed any specific determination as tools or as resources. This is why Blanchot writes that the words of the poem “do not repeat or make use of themselves, or speak of present things”; they indicate, which means that they point beyond themselves, they give a sign, like the Lord of Delphi according to Heraclitus (“The Beast of Lascaux” 33).^[7]

*

What does Char's "*La Bête Innommable*" indicate?

*La Bête innomable ferme la marche du gracieux troupeau, comme un cyclope bouffe.
Huit quolibets font sa parure, divisent sa folie.
La Bête rote dévotement dans l'air rustique.
Ses flancs, bourrés et tombants sont douloureux, vont se vider de leur grossesse.
De son sabot à ses vaines défenses, elle est enveloppée de fécondité.*

*Ainsi m'apparaît dans la frise de Lascaux, mère fantastiquement déguisée,
La Sagesse aux yeux pleins de larmes.*

(*Oeuvres complètes* 352)

The unnameable Beast rounds off the graceful herd like a comic cyclops.
Eight jibes adorn her and divide her madness.
The Beast belches devoutly in the country air.
Her heavy hanging sides are arching and must empty their charge.
From her hooves to her horns that helplessly defend her, a rank scent surrounds her.

Comes to me thus, in the frieze at Lascaux – Mother inconceivably disguised —
Wisdom, her eyes full of tears.

(Trans. Mark Hutchinson, *Selected Poems* 83)

This contradictory creature trails after the graceful creatures the poet has described in the accompanying poems, but she is without grace, her grotesque, absurdly long horns futile. Her crammed and sagging sides are sore indicating a painful pregnancy — but she is our mother, fantastically disguised. She is, this mad beast, “Wisdom,” with her eyes full of tears. She belches, but she does so piously. Char's portrait baffles us. But, as Starobinski tells us, “for whoever knows how to listen, there is, behind many a poem of Char, a fecund couple, a play of antagonists or even incompatibles” (“René Char” 117). In this poem, above all, we are confronted by several antagonisms. How do we account, in particular, for the serene and luminous coda that follows the choppy rhythms that seems to mime the creature's ungainliness? How can this grotesque creature of the depths lacking in reason, grace and effectiveness, whose gravid condition pains her, grant us wisdom?

Char draws our attention to the antagonisms in the frozen image on the cavewall uncovering, in the surprising coda, the wisdom concealed by her madness. James Lawler reminds us that “the final lines are not contradictory but the end-link in a chain

whereby we recognise the hidden presence and consecrated image – grotesque only with respect to conventional figurations of the sacred – of humanity’s time past and still to be” (*The Myth and the Poem* 69).

The forgotten beast is our mother disguised, the figure of the Muse who, Blanchot tells us, is forgetting. Char’s hypermnesic poem has recalled us to the crossing point where philosophy was born from the song. Her ungainliness is a figure for our anxiety; her strife for the strife between the experience the poem brings to the order of experience.

5. *At the Crossing Point*

i

I have contrasted the modern poem and the ancient song, showing how the singer’s cosmogony, the myth that founds a community by retelling its story gives way to the modern poem, in which the original experience reaches beyond all cosmogonic myth. Traditionally, the song gave way to philosophy; with Xenophanes and Heraclitus, theoretical speculation begins to emerge as such out of cosmogony. Plato and Aristotle give philosophy canonical form, and philosophy as theoretical reflection gets underway. But Blanchot recalls us to the crossing point at which theoretical speculation began, arguing that Xenophanes and Heraclitus resist insertion into a narrative about the passage from myth and cosmogony to philosophy. It is modern poetry that, he claims, would return us to the same crossing point – to an experience of nature as an experience of language.

Blanchot compares Char not only to Heraclitus but to Xenophanes, a wandering singer whose song was also a kind of thought – “a language which rejected the legends of the gods, harshly questioning them as well as itself” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 30). His listeners, Blanchot avers, “were present at a very strange event: the birth of philosophy in poetry (*la naissance de la philosophie dans le poème*)” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 30). Blanchot presents Char’s poetry as a return to the crossing point when philosophy had not yet become theoretical speculation.

This is the wisdom of Char’s poetry insofar as it returns us (and *brings us*) to the crossing point. I have argued that with Blanchot poetry is always linked to the origin, which is experienced by author and reader alike in terms of an anxiety since it escapes the measure of the reigning order of experience. I have also claimed that the poem points to what it promises — to the earthiness that conceals itself and must remain concealed even as the poem reveals it. Belonging neither to the present, to the reigning order of experience, nor to the future, insofar as it is opened by a chain of efficient causation to the present, the “oath [*l’oblige*]” that binds the poem to the

future does so only through the “anxiety and uncertainty” of the original experience (“The Beast of Lascaux” 34). As Blanchot writes, “the poetry seems as if it wishes to break through beyond the light and seize on the violent opening, the original cleavage through which all things are lit up, and awakend, and given promise. . . .” (“The Beast of Lascaux” 34); the future opens in its incalculability – as what, in everything, refuses to be utilised, to disappear into stock.

What does the original experience convey to us? Blanchot writes:

“the fantastically disguised mother, Wisdom, with her eyes full of tears,” whom René Char has identified, from the frieze at Lascaux, in the form of the “Beast unnameable,” speaks to us in just such a language, with the voice of the oak, the closed and rigorous speech of the aphorism, the indistinctness of a primal word. (“The Beast of Lascaux” 40)

The Lascaux painters made the cavewalls sing. Char, the poet, will mobilise everything in language to let the song resound once more. Poetry is his resource, but he does not use words as a carpenter uses a hammer; as Heidegger has written the work of art “sets itself back. . .into the naming power of the word” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 171): nature is no longer captured by utility; art, by contrast, reveals what exceeds our grasp.

The poem teaches us – but what is its lesson? The deer the Lascaux artist painted leap ahead of us; the hunter will not catch them. The poet who ensnares them sets them free in another dimension. They leap towards us, traversing the space of millennia but they will never complete their leap. The pregnancy of the nameless beast on the cavewall pains her, but she will never come to term. She weeps and cannot have done with weeping. The wisdom of poetry resides in the memory it keeps of what has been lost and the anxiety in which it implicates us, its readers.

ii

I have argued that the modern poem remembers a certain non-phenomenality that nevertheless belongs to phenomenality – remembers, that is, what deceives us in the memories that each of us bear as individuals. This memory, linked to the individual, is not false because the poet has a better memory as an individual, but because the poem attests to a forgetting that resists the individualisation or subjectivisation of memory. This is the absence to which I have referred; one that reveals the way in which the economy of memory and forgetting deceives us as to itself. Memory is not simple; it does not simply mediate, bringing the past to the present. It is under the sway of refusal, a “no” that preserves a certain constitutive and ineradicable gap within

memory that cannot be conceived in a simple sense as forgetting. If the word forgetting is to be used, then it must be used *aneconomically*, that is, insofar as it is no longer part of an individualisation of the dynamics of memory and forgetting.

René Char's poetry is exemplary for Blanchot because it is sourced in an awareness of the movement of poetry – its *poetising*, so to speak – insofar as it is linked to the equivocation, the cleaving that has been described. Answering to it, restaging it as its very “content,” Char's poetry reveals the anxiety with which its creation was bound up, and it does so in a way that affirms this anxiety, taking joy in it, showing how it can no longer be cast in terms of the experience of the solitary being. For its author and its readers alike – for the community that it gathers, albeit from a greater distance, a greater time-span – the poem constitutes an event, the happening of which bestows an incalculable futurity.^[8] It does not confirm us in our view of what things are, but recalls us to the fact that a certain *absence* haunts the existence of the things in the world we inhabit – that we, too, the inhabitants are similarly haunted.

Who are we, readers of Blanchot, readers of Char? Summoned by an event that discloses a certain reserve we might be reluctant to remember that we are the ones for whom the origin never blossoms into a beginning that any of us could claim as his or her own. Blanchot reminds us of what already prevented the submission of song to mnemotechnics for the Greeks. He shows us that verse is not a medium and that it can never be trusted to bear a memory. He also permits us to understand how, with a certain modernity, poetry comes to reflect upon its own movement and incarnate it, testifying in an exemplary manner to the poetising of poetry. And he teaches us that philosophy is sourced in the song and must answer to it if we are to respond to the speech that, even now, is issued to us from things around us.

Blanchot would have us linger at the crossing point, in a community that allows the original experience to return. We have heard it before – philosophy begins in the experience of wonder; but Blanchot tells us that the birth of philosophy dissimulates its belonging to what we have learned to call poetry. Modern poetry would, if we would permit it, draw philosophy back into the shifting earth of its inception, into the earth that turns us from ourselves even as we enter it. Philosophy – thinking – must learn anew, according to Blanchot, how to risk opening itself to the desire that poetry incarnates, to the primal words that attest to the difference at the heart of nature, of being.

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Endnotes

[1] For example, the word, fire is claimed by Aristotle to be the first cause (see *Metaphysics* 984a7); Philoponus, commenting on Aristotle, avers of Heraclitus, "by fire he does not mean flame: fire is the name he gives to the dry exhalation, of which the soul also consists" (see Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 432-433). Heidegger and Eugen Fink show how fire is linked by Heraclitus to the thought of logos (see Heidegger, *Heraclitus Seminars 1966-1967*).

[2] See Heidegger's *Early Greek Thinking*, 59-78.

[3] Although Plato has great respect for Heraclitus, he puts the following words in the mouth of Theodorus, perhaps indicating his own worry about a teacher who transmits his thought teaching in written words: "one can no more have a rational conversation with those very Ephesians who claim to be the pundits than one can with lunatics"; "people like that don't become pupils of one another. They spring up automatically here, there and wherever inspiration strikes them; and they don't recognise one another's claims to knowledge. . .you'll never get an explanation from them, even if they're intending to give you one!" (*Theatetus* 179d, 180C)

[4] Says King Thamus to Theuth, the inventor of writing: "your invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as though reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from the inside, themselves by themselves: you have discovered an elixir not of memory but reminding" (*Phaedrus* 274e).

[5] In *Penser l'apocalypse*, Blanchot writes of the “veritable intellectual shock” of reading Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as a student. As Leslie Hill notes, with the essay “The ‘Sacred’ Word of Hölderlin,” of which the two essays on Char are contemporaries, “Blanchot began explicitly to articulate in his published critical work the outlines of a more thorough and more demanding engagement with Heidegger” (*Blanchot – Extreme Contemporary* 81). Hill provides an admirable reading of Blanchot’s negotiation of Heidegger’s thought (*Blanchot – Extreme Contemporary* 77-90). On the relationship between Blanchot and Heidegger, see Iyer, “The Temple of Night.”

[6] See Iyer, “Cave Paintings and Wall Writings.”

[7] The reference here is to the following fragment: “The Lord who owns the oracle at Delphi neither speaks nor hides his meaning but indicates it by a sign” (Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* 118).

[8] On the notion of community in Blanchot, see my “Born With the Dead” and “Blanchot’s Communism.”