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Jean Cranmer

*University of New Orleans, [jcranmer@uno.edu](mailto:jcranmer@uno.edu)*

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## Jean-Claude Renard: And the Word Was Made *Mystère*

by Jean R. Cranmer

JEAN-CLAUDE RENARD HAS BEEN CALLED a "Catholic poet"; he, however, rejects this epithet, calling himself instead a "poet-believer" (*poète croyant*). It is true that his poetic expression of faith does not draw upon the tenets of Catholicism to the exclusion of other religions. Renard is not a Péguy or a Claudel; his works do not celebrate the liturgy of a particular church or poetically reaffirm an established set of beliefs. Nor is he analogous to his contemporary, Pierre Emmanuel, another poet-believer, whose affirmation of his Catholic faith is expressed in a language confident of its power as signifier. Renard's poetic language, on the other hand, is free to create its own realities, and serves to chart for the poet a metaphysical itinerary of doubt, self-interrogation, and exploration.

The object of Renard's quest is knowledge of the unique principle, the Absolute, from which all else springs. Even though he is a believer, seldom is there mention of God in his work, and when it occurs, it is usually written *dieu* with the lower case *d*. He refers to the absolute as *mystère*, since it is always just beyond the limit of his human understanding. Conceding that he will never know the exact nature of this *mystère*, the poet is nevertheless driven to the obstinate pursuit of its elucidation. It is within the context of the poetic experience itself, and more specifically, within the context of poetic language that this pursuit takes place. The poetic relationship that Renard sustains with the unknowable and the unattainable invites a comparison to his compatriot from the Midi, René Char, for whom "le poème est l'amour réalisé du désir demeuré désir" (73). Like Renard, Char continually renews his contemplation of the absence and silence that constitute the unknown; although, for Char the unknown is more often fixed in the obscure regions of the subconscious than in the metaphysical.

For Renard, as for the evangelist St. John in the opening words of his gospel—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"—the creative power of language is inextricably linked to the mystery of the ultimate source of all being. The intention of this article is to show what is, for Renard, the relationship between poetry and *mystère* and to analyse the ways that he uses language to capture fragments and to approach an understanding of the illusive absolute he seeks.

First of all, it is clear that the poet's attempts to reveal the unknown through poetry are, in fact, attempts to replicate in some way the initial

verbal act of creation. For Renard, as he states in one of his essays on poetry, the fundamental function of the poem is naming. In naming, the poem does not simply point out or communicate the surfaces of things, but rather engenders "des *planètes mentales* nouvelles chargées de sens nouveaux" (*Une Autre* 15). To do this the poet must find a language that is "clean," so to speak, a language at its "degré zéro," that is not encrusted with the constraints and common places of human logic: "Bref, pour être, il faut que le poème réussisse à constituer, avec les mêmes mots et les mêmes règles . . . que ceux et celles du langage courant, un langage différent et nouveau: *une autre parole*" (*Une Autre* 12). Orphic in his master scheme, creating new mental spheres out of a new and different use of language, Renard flirts with, but resists, the hermetic lure implicit in the process of saying the unsayable. The fact is that the poet cannot really create from zero because he must use an existing idiom. What he does then is to approach, as nearly as possible, a kind of instinctual, pre-communicative language where what cannot be said can be suggested (*Martin* 9). The vocabulary that Renard uses is not, for all that, abstruse or even abstract; on the contrary it is rich in familiar references to nature and often to landscapes, either of Brittany or of the poet's native Midi. The universe that he fashions from it, however, is unfamiliar or at least strange in its lack of logical structure. In a poem entitled "L'Espace de la parole," published in 1969, the poet creates a space at first barren, then progressively lush in physical imagery as he charts, in geographic terms, the simultaneous evolution of language and human existence:

En ce pays bas de brûlures,  
De raisins braisés, d'enneigements  
Où l'on ne peut faire qu'exister  
La parole n'est pas possible. (*Les* 100 49)

The barrenness of the initial landscape describes a void of language and presents only nullified and destroyed forms of existence. The dichotomous images of both scorched and frozen destruction reinforce the poet's notion that existence in a state of pre-language is experienced on a level so primitive that sensory differentiation can presumably not be perceived. As the poet awaits the awakening of his poetic voice, "[e]n respirant comme un poulpe endormi" (*Les* 100 50), his very existence is tentative, having little awareness of itself, and is, hence, compared atavistically to the existence of this very primitive creature. It is the dawning of language that simultaneously engenders the poet's awareness of himself as a being, then releases the creativity dormant within, but nurtured by his own physical existence:

Une langue naissante et où je nais  
S'approche  
Qui aime l'esprit,  
—Semblable en mes tourbières aux roses dévorantes. (*Les* 100 50)

The transformation in the poet is both physical and spiritual, destructive and creative, and takes place through the philosopher's stone of language: "Comme l'alchimiste, le poète pratique cette double opération: il détruit le langage pour le recréer et métamorphoser les mots ordinaires, il se transforme lui-même pour s'accomplir" (Favre 146).

From the moment the power of speech is attained, the universe springs alive in a profusion and confusion of sensory imagery: "un bruit d'orange," "la saveur des cèpes grillés avec des feuilles de sarriette," "(le) goût de cassis," "l'écorce où la résine écume comme un noyau de cristal pur" (*Les 100* 50). Breathless and intoxicated "[p]ar la fête pure de dire" (*Les 100* 50), the alchemy of saying celebrates its power to be the instrument of its own transformation: "Mais qu'au fond du langage / S'éveille et se célèbre la parole de l'être" (*Les 100* 51). Naming then not only brings the thing into being; once named, the new reality generates its own language, which in turn brings about further transformation in its being. An example of this operation can be found in the image just mentioned, "l'écorce où la résine écume comme un noyau de cristal pur." Once the verb *écumer* has been juxtaposed to the resin, the nature of the latter is transformed; it is no longer heavy, opaque, and viscous, but light, translucent, ebullient, and faceted. Prompted by the properties of translucency and faceting it shares with the core of crystal, the foaming bubble of resin transforms itself again by exchanging its ephemeral qualities for those of solidity and structural complexity. The metaphor of the core of crystal is one that Renard often uses to express the idea of experience transformed by the power of words. Language multiplies the field of possible meanings and interpretations of experience, just as the crystal facets multiply the angles through which one may see into the interior. Again it is language that provides so many faceted paths that lead to the contemplation of the *mystère*.

Yet for all the prismatic splendor and density of this poetic language of creation, what the poet presents to us in the end, in this and other poems, is not the *mystère* we have been led to expect, but rather its prophecy. Like the Word, in the gospel of John, made Flesh to dwell among us that we may reflect on the glory of the father, the symbolic gesturing of creation, suggests, reflects, and refers to a mystery greater than itself without revealing it:

Une voix se tient au verger, dans la paix des pêches humides,  
Fascinée par la prophétie,  
L'écriture intacte et natale qui n'annonce que l'espérance  
—Mais comme des cerises sous le givre,  
Une femme avec du gravier et du goémon sur les seins  
Ou l'auspice d'un merle bleu,  
Et conduit plus loin le regard,  
Au-delà de toute mémoire,  
Vers une future merveille. (*Les 100* 51)

For Renard the *merveille* is always just out of reach, but his need, indeed his obsession, to persist in his quest for the "One," as he names it, is only strengthened by the frustration of his efforts. His inability to grasp the mystery is but a further proof to him of its existence. He reasons that since the void he feels inside was created by the absence of the absolute, this same void can only be filled by the presence of the absolute: "Un vide en moi s'avive—où vient sourdre un appel formé pour la réponse et pour l'unique essence / De ce qui l'a créé" (*Les* 100 37).

The poetic articulation of Renard's search for the infinite unknown is often based on the paradox of emptiness and abundance or of absence and presence. It is, for example, from the interior void that the profusion of poetic images springs: "Ce vide en moi qui désigne / La profusion et ses signes . . ." (*Selected* 28). Conversely, while the density of signs and symbols compacted within the limited space of the poem propels the reader from one image to another in rapid succession, it also leaves the impression of coming up empty-handed. Profuse and rich poetic images suddenly and paradoxically evaporate, disappearing back into the void from which they came, and leaving the mystery intact: "Apprends ainsi que, par merveilles, / . . . le mystère vide le vide" (*Les* 100 77). In the end everything in this arcane universe terminates in silence and absence.

Perhaps it is this teleology of self-generated disappearance to which Renard destins his poetry that makes his use of paradox, as well as other tropes and rhetorical language, unique. Charged with no less a task than to communicate what is beyond experience and beyond language, poetic language must allow itself the same inevitable movement and self-transformation as the images of resin, foam, and crystal considered above. Since "la poésie désigne l'au-delà du langage à l'intérieur même du langage" (*Une Autre* 48), poetry is in a permanent state of paradox. It must always transcend itself, be more than it is, be what is absent from it:

Noirs sur la page les mots se masquent, se font pure nuit. . . .  
L'écriture . . . efface la figure première—déporte l'oeil et la main.  
Puis l'écran vide disparaît.  
Près du verre d'alcool, il ne reste qu'un trou d'où l'étrange enfance  
peut monter. (*Toutes* 26)

All that poetry can say about experience is to be found in traces of attempts at saying. The very presence of the poem informs us, paradoxically, of the absence of the poem. The words are thick and opaque and cover the page; the poem is to be found elsewhere.

In order to approach the mystery shrouded in silence, Renard imagines existence at the very origin of speech and further beyond. At this distant point, he conjectures, all things converge in the unity of the One which absorbs and neutralizes even antithetical notions, just as, in paradox, contradiction is absorbed by truth. One of the most striking examples of the

poet's ability to manipulate language in self-contradiction can be found in his collection, *Toutes Les Iles sont secrètes*:

Comme une bouche absente  
sans absence  
le *non-né* profère dans le vide  
le naître et le renaître.

Franchis  
l'extérieur et l'intérieur  
savoir  
ne sert plus à savoir.

Ce seul: ce sel  
—ce *là-bas* plus proche que l'ici  
fait en moi,  
fait avec moi ses nocés.

Présent partout et nulle part  
l'*Un* (devenant ce qu'il n'est pas)  
se multiplie  
puis se rejoint dans l'*Un*.

Le silence  
traverse le silence. (31)

This poem provides as concise an expression of what one critic has called Renard's "poetics of mystery" (Alter 4) as the poet has ever written. In it we follow an itinerary to an "elsewhere" that sets out at the dawn of language, passes through, and dissolves as it goes, the barrier of antithesis, and draws into it images encountered along the way. In this instance the concrete manifestations of the exterior world are distilled into a single image, that of salt. A crystalline compound as ancient as the earth and the sea, one of the three elements in alchemy, and a substance used for anointing in ceremonies of consecration, salt is a most fitting channel of passage from nature to a plane of mystical experience. Its symbolic value to the discovery of the absolute is underscored linguistically and phonetically by the juxtaposition of the word *sel* to the word *seul*. Within the poet-chemist and within poetry, the union between the world and the beyond-the-world is consummated. The poetic experience and the religious experience are united in the contemplation of the One. However, while the enigma of self-contradiction—that is, the ability of the absolute to be both what it is and what it is not—can somehow be temporarily held and intuitively grasped within the ambiguous "other" space of the poem, the enigma cannot truly be understood or expressed within the space of language itself. Hence, the poem turns, as it inevitably must, to silence. The silence, however, is itself paradoxically charged, for although it safeguards the unspoken secret of the unknown, it also functions as a bridge to the revelation of the *mystère*. This ambiguity occurs with the transformation of silence into a spatial

image of linkage through the use of the verb *traverser*. Since no final answer is provided, either affirmative or negative, the prophecy remains unfulfilled and intact; the question remains open and the quest continues: "Qu'aucune clôture n'exclue l'incertitude: / la fécondation nocturne!" (*Toutes* 32).

There are many other uses of language, spawned by the "nocturnal fecundation" of possibilities, that lead to reflection upon the mystery in Renard's poetry. In creating "new mental planets" the poet may use images from *this* planet, but he combines them in ways that are often startling and even disconcerting. In the following excerpt from *La Terre du sacre*, published in 1966, Renard's unrequited desire for a response from the infinite is conveyed in a painful image of despair: "Ma bouche bourbeuse, vide / Crie par morsure d'acide / Sur le silence aggravé" (*Selected* 26). The miry mouth and the acid bite are images so powerful and violent that the silence is physically disturbed by the piercing cry of metaphysical anguish that they produce. Through this use of concrete images and language, associated in unaccustomed contexts, Renard produces a sort of "incarnation désincarnés" (*Une Autre* 20) in his poetry that can be, as in this instance, quite surrealistic.

In another selection, the tension between the emotional effusion that faith produces in the poet and the ascetic rigors it imposes on him produces a metaphor of animal sensuality that is abruptly held in check:

Où que mon amour halène  
La mer chaude comme un renne

Le gel me tient à l'aboi  
Dans la difficile foi. (*Selected* 28)

Here the poet actually does create a new verb, *halener*, by combining the noun *haleine* with the verb *haleter*. Even though the reader instinctively grasps the meaning of the new word, its use is at first disorienting, particularly when associated with the abstract noun *amour*. The direct object of the verb, *la mer chaude*, and the simile, *comme un renne*, continue to keep the reader off balance by their ambiguity. Is loving scenting the warm sea as would a reindeer, or is love scenting the sea that is as warm as a reindeer? In either case, taking scent of the sea seems as highly unlikely an activity to attribute to a reindeer as the comparison between the warmth of the sea and an animal associated with cold climates is improbable. Yet the *autre parole* of poetic language transcends the elements of its composition and renders clear what is obfuscated by reason and logic.

To create this effect of surface disorder wherein perception is confused, Renard uses a great deal of synesthetic imagery. In the air, there may be "un goût de chevrefeuille" (*Selected* 34), or "un bruit d'oranges" (*Selected* 70) may settle in the ear. Elsewhere "l'oreille lit . . . l'écriture" and "les yeux . . . voient un cri" (*Toutes* 30). Whatever the instance, synesthesia is used as a means of revealing what is beyond the power of the senses to

perceive. Its use is often associated with the poet's desire to convey sensorial impressions as they may have been registered at a time before language, that is, at a time before the senses were named, categorized, and prescribed specific and limited functions. In other instances the senses are confused in order to create a landscape that transcends logic and that, hence, may be a suitable place for the *mystère* to reveal itself.

In his quest for a manifestation of the unknown, Renard overlooks no possible source of enlightenment. His itinerary is drawn from the practices and beliefs of many western and eastern religions; he even chronicles a visit to the oracle, proffering questions that suggest enigmatic answers: "La mort éclaire-t-elle la chambre du secret? / . . . / Où finit-on de côtoyer? / Comment écrire ce qui détruit toute inscription? / L'oracle s'habite-t-il lui-même?" (*Les* 100-79). In fact, Renard's poems abound in the use of the interrogative form. In a sense, poetry is the poet's own Sphinx, questioning him on the nature and utility of his search, on the form it should take and on the ability of language to express what it is he seeks. The questions do not seem to anticipate responses: "Où va l'itinéraire? / . . . / Qui écrit l'être sans écrire—là où qui écrit n'écrit rien? / . . . / Quelle fête (en même temps) ni ne se montre ni ne se cache? Révèle et occulte? Se donne et se retire? S'absenter comme sans s'absenter?" (*Toutes* 59-60). When the oracle, or some other voice, does respond, it is in enigmatic aphorisms that echo the metaphysical paradoxes that captivate the poet: "L'existence commence là où elle cesse d'exister. / Dieu ne s'ouvre qu'au delà de Dieu. / . . . / Atteindre le vide du vide" (*Toutes* 86). Or perhaps the voice whispers gentle imperatives to encourage him in his pursuit of the *mystère*: "Cours le risque du dieu. / . . . / Ne maudis aucun secret. / . . . / Profane sans cesse toute idole. / . . . / Annule ta voix dans la Voix" (*Toutes* 80-81).

The ascetic movement of Renard's communion with the absolute is often accompanied by a voice, that of mystical incantation. In the following example, the poet plunges directly into the occult by creating a setting of secrecy and concealment within which a spell is intoned:

Puis, dans la caverne, aux justes heures, par actes secrets et terribles,  
pratique l'œuvre des couleurs d'où naît le sens.  
Le *noir* dissout.  
Le *blanc* coagule.  
Le *rouge* unit.  
Le *vert* réalise.  
Le *bleu* rayonne.  
Alors, la pierre formée et clos le cercle magique, la sagesse s'ouvre  
dans le silence (*Toutes* 28).

Within this pagan depiction of ritual commerce with the powers of the universe, the utterance of the "workings" of colors can be taken as a "proper" incantation, in that the words appear to function outside of reason and create simply, through their rhythm, a heightened sense of the mystical, an atmosphere disconnected from the mundane, wherein mystical



truths can reveal themselves. On the other hand, one can also argue a connotative basis for the use of the verb *dissoudre* with the color black, *coaguler* with white, and so on, as well as point out an orderly ascetic progression from the concept of dissolution to that of luminosity, from ignorance to knowledge, from doubt to belief, from despair to beatitude. Therefore, from an apparent lack of rational structure that is here associated with primitive rites, springs an interior intuitive logic that opens the way to communion with the infinite unknown.

Renard's poetic universe is richly colored in sensory images from the world around us. These images, however, continually transform themselves into fragments of a mystical paradise glimpsed by the poet in his desired migration to a place at the source of all creation. The Earth offers itself as a means to envision, or rather, to create a vision of the absolute power which brought it into being. It is here that the religious experience and the poetic experience coincide, because it is through language that the poet's vision is made to appear. Through the fusion of the concrete with the abstract, the laws of nature cease to function in the usual manner and the immaterial is able to emanate from the material. Through the use of synesthesia, sensory perception is confused and a primitive state, approaching that of pre-communicative perception, is created. Through the use of neologisms and by empowering language to say what it wants to say, often through its own inherent movement toward paradox, the impression of a new and different mental sphere is conveyed. Finally, through the extensive use of the interrogative form and a vocabulary of absence, the vision of the unknown is constantly called into question, but never revealed. The poetic Word of Jean-Claude Renard thereby transforms the flesh of the world into *mystère*.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS

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