



Phillipe Soupault, 1922, by Man Ray



René Crevel, 1930s

## PHILIPPE SOUPAULT

# Two Poets of the Avant-Garde Recollections

Editor's note: French poet and novelist Philippe Soupault was a central figure in the Surrealist movement. Guillaume Apollinaire, an early advocate of Soupault's work, introduced him to André Breton, with whom, together with Louis Aragon, Soupault founded the influential Surrealist review *Littérature*. In this role he was ideally positioned to know and work with many leading avant-garde writers of his time. In 1963 he published a book, *Profils perdus* (Lost profiles), in which he provided his recollections from four decades earlier of a group of writers who changed the course of modern literature.

In the book he described a visit from a group of students. "What mostly interests them is less what I currently think than what I thought when I was their age," Soupault remarked. "For them it is already ancient history." But Soupault's sketches have nothing of the quality of ancient history. Instead they are lively and personal, giving a sense of their subjects not just as writers but as individuals, with all their quirks and mannerisms. Here he recalls two very different figures, René Crevel, best known for the novel *Babylone* (Babylon) and for his suicide at age thirty-four, and Pierre Reverdy, poet and founder of the influential modernist journal *Nord-Sud* (North-South).

## René Crevel

One night at the beginning of autumn, René Crevel and I were walking along the banks of the Seine. René was talking very fast, as he always did. I stopped in my tracks before one of the trees that grace the banks of the Seine. It had leaves no bigger than hundred-sou coins. The wind, so gentle that we hadn't even noticed it, shook the little leaves, and the tree seemed to tremble.

"There's a tree that's like you," I said to Crevel.

He readily agreed. All in all, I think I was not mistaken.

René Crevel was a trembling being. He trembled from head to toe—painfully, I should add. Whatever the breeze or tempest that caused it, I knew full well that this trembling was permanent, that Crevel could never stop shaking. He was born rebellious, as others are born with blue eyes.

Even his laugh, so tremendous, so tragic, so unbearable, was a revolt. Intense and quick, Crevel rebelled against those around him as soon as he began to think. I didn't know them well, but his family's behavior was enough to make him furious. And I think that the friendship he showed me ever since our first meeting was triggered because he learned my family was like his, and I too had not been able to resist rebelling.

He was an insurgent. Likeable, pleasant, and always anxious to please, he was also contradictory. He was willing to mingle with "impossible" people, even with unbearable snobs. He had no wish to forgo his amusements, and he felt no shame for this dubious company. I know well now that what he sought in these associations was quite naturally the chance to rebel and to express his rebellion.

So as not to cause trouble, I won't name names, for he was incapable of not liking those on whom he bestowed his company. Did he have second thoughts? I don't think so.

I often saw him arrive, fuming, at evening (or rather, nighttime) events (he craved nightlife), where he was sure to meet creatures that horrified him; and yet, armed with his smile, he would show them the utmost kindness (I apologize for writing this word which must nonetheless be used in the case of Crevel). But as soon as he had the chance, and sometimes even when he didn't, he would explode and resume trembling with indignation.

When André Breton and I published *Les champs magnétiques* (*The Magnetic Fields*),<sup>1</sup> Crevel was among the first to accept our challenge. Notably, he did not make the mistake of judging this book by conventional literary standards. His contribution to Surrealism from that day forward was considerable.

What I'd wish him to be known for, having observed him many days, is the way, despite his nonchalance and apparent detachment, he remained one of the most honest men of his time. I didn't share all of his tastes, and I admit I sometimes fled some of his more offensive friends. I don't want to say more, but I knew them. But he certainly liked danger and, without bragging or boasting, he sought "*le dérèglement de tous ses sens*."<sup>2</sup>

He did suffer terribly.

And despite all the friendship that I myself and others bore him, we never succeeded in averting his suffering. He had a gift for suffering and knew it. But this knowledge didn't prevent his pressing forward, with all his nervous energy. Useless to tell him that he was wrong to violently want to be right.

His smile, and still more his laugh, illustrated this faculty for suffering and, though I scarce dare write it, his will to suffer.

I remember one evening I met him at some friends'—to my great surprise, since I had learned the same day that he had heard, from a suspect source, not about the death of one of his dearest friends but about his ruination, in a highly nasty situation. As soon as I entered the studio where we were meeting for a drink, I heard Crevel's laugh. And all evening he laughed himself breathless, and I couldn't help listening to the laugh, which was truly peculiar. He caught sight of me and not surprisingly reported, "I knew." He simply told me: "I don't dare leave."

And he left me, to go and laugh horribly in the corner, where the dreadful people were joking. A few days later, I learned he was sick and wanted to be absolutely alone. I

<sup>1</sup> Published in 1920, the book is often hailed as the first book of literary Surrealism, and was the first composed using the Surrealist method of automatic writing.

<sup>2</sup> "Derangement of all his senses" refers to Rimbaud's often quoted prescription for seeing into the unknown.

saw him again a month later, but he would not share his sadness with me. He had already set out—hands clenched, lips chapped, dark circles under his eyes—for the abyss that lay in wait for him, its jaws wide open.

Crevel was indeed one of those of whom it can be said that they have lost their illusions. But it did not make him bitter. He knew how to amuse himself, especially about human beings. He was indignant at their weaknesses, yet he rejoiced in their peculiarities, and his admiration for madmen (still more perhaps for madwomen) was extreme. He took pleasure in the company of the cranks and dreamers who were, happily, fairly numerous in Paris. In this realm he was eclectic. But he knew how to “shrink” them, the way that Indians shrink heads of the dead. I believe at a certain point in his life he even collected those he called “extraordinaries.” He preferred to meet them at night, because, he claimed, after twilight they were more sure of themselves.

When he was alone, he was happy to write letters. His handwriting, oversized for his age, was quick and cheerful. Should we hope that someone collects and publishes his letters? Even though I am personally opposed to this kind of posthumous exhibitionism, I think one could publish some of the dedications with which he generously embellished his books, in the guise of explanations.

All the same, he preferred to telephone. The role the telephone played in Crevel’s life is hard to gauge. But it was important. René Crevel felt the need to stay in contact with “his people,” his friends or his strange companions, but also to clarify his thinking. No sooner had he ended a conversation than he’d ring up to explain at length exactly what he had meant to say.

If I harp on this proclivity for the telephone (which is not so rare today), it’s because it seems to me to illustrate René Crevel’s determination never to leave his friendships at a standstill. He couldn’t bear to not clear up misunderstandings. And sometimes, because the misunderstanding wasn’t cleared up as he wished, he didn’t hesitate to fall out (as he put it). But more than misunderstandings, he hated indifference or neutrality. He pushed people to the wall, but wouldn’t let himself be cornered. He was ready, moreover, to suffer the consequences of his behavior. But it would be wrong to think that these demands were hard to accept. Crevel knew the secret of being both intransigent

and affable at the same time, harsh and engaging and, for some, fascinating.

René Crevel’s “charm” has been much discussed, perhaps too much. This vague word, overused and randomly bestowed, does not convey the radiance of the man Crevel. I’ve asked many of his friends to try to define it, and none could do so. They gave me a lot of reasons, but they all seemed too vague to remember. All I wish to recall is that, from the moment you saw Crevel or spoke to him, you knew you were in the presence of someone different, and I use this word in its strongest sense. He was, it’s easy to say now, determined to direct his destiny so as not to founder in the facile, in banal literary milieus, in success at any price. But he was capable of dangerously grazing these rocks. Rereading his books is enough to recognize the risks he liked to run: *Détours* or *Babylone*. In *Mon Corps et moi*,<sup>3</sup> however, he seemed to want to renounce the tightrope walker’s poise, in asserting himself, to shake off the weight of all he had agreed to carry until then. After all, the books he published, as fast as he could, were only dubious reflections of himself. And I’m convinced that he didn’t want to attach too much importance to them. He even gladly forgot them, and I had the impression that for him the books were bottles thrown into the sea. He was not a man of messages nor of calls to action. He preferred experimentation, and I believe he took delight in considering his novels in particular not as finely tuned works but as trials. Furthermore, thanks to Surrealism, he discovered a realm of wide-open spaces that he traveled through alone. He didn’t have the time to continue his explorations, but I’m certain it was this activity he would primarily want to be remembered for.

So, despite the uncommon faithfulness of his friends, what is remembered about René Crevel is likely to leave out the very things he held most dear. What is needed is to encompass the entire story of his life.

<sup>3</sup> *Mon Corps et moi* (*My Body and I*, 1925) explores the tensions between body and spirit.

## Pierre Reverdy

**A**fter his discharge in 1916, Pierre Reverdy lived in a rustic little house in Montmartre. You climbed a stairway that reminded you of a ladder and entered a whitewashed room lit by two windows. A large table in front of one of the windows. Some sheets of paper and a big inkwell on the table.

Reverdy would be sitting at his table. It was his kingdom. He would smile. The smile was ironic, suspicious, but fascinating. Then, his eyes.... Reverdy had dark eyes, sparkling, pitiless, but sometimes revealing a surprising glint of tenderness. His gaze was as disturbing as his smile because it pinned you, like a butterfly is pinned to a corkboard.

It was his love of poetry that determined him to publish the *Nord-Sud* review. But I believe he would have preferred to remain alone and write, lacking any desire to make contact with other poets. Of course he liked and admired Guillaume Apollinaire, though he criticized him, not unreasonably, for trying to do too much. He was friends with his neighbor Max Jacob, but he was annoyed seeing that poet putting on an act. He preferred the company of painters to that of poets: Picasso, Georges Braque even more, the sculptor Laurens most of all. I asked him the reason for this predilection. “They lie less,” he told me. I was surprised by (and wonder at) some of his preferences. During this period of his life that was so fruitful and that dominated all his work, he truly, naturally enjoyed himself only when he was able to talk “man to man” with a Chilean poet who wrote in Spanish and French, Vicente Huidobro, who was indeed a genuine poet—Reverdy’s most loyal disciple—and also with a Spanish musician, the remarkable guitarist Soler Casabón, whom Erik Satie and Ricardo Viñes, his compatriot, admired. Reverdy was also quite tolerant (which surprised and irritated me) of one of his clumsiest imitators, Paul Dermée, whose goodwill disarmed him.

It was Guillaume Apollinaire who encouraged Reverdy to receive me. I knew only a few of Reverdy’s poems, but I did read the *Nord-Sud* review. I think what convinced the poet to welcome me was that he wanted to meet a reader (one of the few) of his review. He looked at me the way one regards a strange creature. He hesitated.



Pierre Reverdy, 1932

Was he going to more or less politely show me the door, or consent to speak with me? Because Reverdy, at that time, put people into two categories. The first, and more numerous, comprised “impossible” people—the importunate, the bores, the snobs, whom he dismissed without mercy. The second, women or men who were “*sympathiques*.” I had to be among this group before he would grant me his friendship. I made no secret of my admiration, which, though it astonished him, he judged to be sincere. But he didn’t give me a chance to talk about it. When it was his turn to speak (and he took the first turn in any conversation), he did not readily relinquish it. When I ventured to agree with him, he cut me off and said most sincerely and without any irony, “Please, let me get a word in....” The only thing to do was to keep quiet. For all that, I thorough-



ly enjoyed listening to him. Pierre Reverdy was not only a “dazzling conversationalist” (how regrettable, in order to be understood, to have to resort to such worn-out phrases) but also a stunning and spellbinding orator. His voice was very beautiful, deep and warm. His slight Narbonne accent punctuated the sentences.

He also spoke with his hands. Strong, heavy hands, but always graceful. Watching his hands, I sometimes forgot to listen, which irritated him. Because you had to listen to him. And how right he was.

In those years, he talked about nothing but poetry. He neglected the war, the lies, the propaganda, the mud, the blood, the carnage, the absurdities, and the rest. Poetry became essential. It is because of him that I now agree that some people should devote themselves to poetry. And he imposed this vocation on me, even though I was tempted to outsmart, to gain power, and cheat like many of my contemporaries. He taught me purity. He taught me to hate cheaters. And if, though it repels me when speaking of Pierre Reverdy, I feel obliged to write “I,” or “me,” it is because I was, and remain, one of the rare witnesses (as he himself told me later) to this period in his life when he tried to define the powers of poetry. At the same time in the same city, a theorist, a faithless disciple of Mallarmé, was doing his best to set artificial limits on it.

Pierre Reverdy had no wish to take notice of such maneuvers. I can’t help comparing Pierre Reverdy’s attitude with that of the man who called himself a poet and who, sadly, would end up in Anatole France’s seat in the French Academy, where he would a little later sing a hymn of praise to Pétain.<sup>4</sup> I am deliberately recalling these memories, contrasting two ambitions, because I want to exalt the dignity of the author of *La Lucarne ovale*.<sup>5</sup> He did not set out to be considered a *poète maudit*. He was filled with pride and was perfectly aware of his genius, but he would never have stooped so low as to solicit or prompt admiration or praise. Too proud to be vain, he accepted being ignored or forgotten, even if it was painful. He was

not, however, so surprised, when he was editing his review, *Nord-Sud*, that young people in love with poetry came to see him. Neither Louis Aragon nor André Breton nor I hid our admiration, which he recognized as quite sincere. He trusted us, since he spoke to us at length many a time about what seemed most precious to him, poetry. Many of these observations can be found in a book to which, he assured me, he attached great importance, *Le Livre de mon bord*, that he didn’t publish until 1948. Already, in *Nord-Sud* and in *Le Gant de crin*, he had defined what he considered essential in his conception of poetry.

He strove to convince us and readily succeeded. He was convinced. Useless to contradict him or even to dispute. He had long pondered the propositions that he emphatically threw in our faces like a couple of smacks. At this time, Reverdy was dedicating a large part of his life to contemplation. He had chosen to make a living proofreading for a printer of daily newspapers. It was a necessity that he accepted since he had to live, but he never mentioned or took any interest in it. You knew that he had only one urgency: to go home as fast as possible and sit at his dear table. His desire for solitude was intense. Despite the kindness he showed to some of those who were to him only visitors, you had the impression that he wished they would leave. But he liked to talk about his discoveries. He spoke often and extremely well, but these conversations, or rather these monologues, ended up irritating him. He liked reading the poems that his friends showed him, but liked even more to critique them and find examples of what to delete. He was not afraid to be severe, without any desire to be mean or cruel. But he didn’t stop thinking.

What must be remembered, what must be emphasized, is that Pierre Reverdy—for his attitude, for his dignity, for his exaction, for his integrity—is one of those rare men that one is proud to have known, to have respected, to have loved.

—Translated from the French by Alan Bernheimer

**Alan Bernheimer’s** most recent collection of poetry is *The Spoonlight Institute* (Adventures in Poetry, 2009). In addition to Soupault, he has translated writing by Valery Larbaud and Robert Desnos.

## THOMAS CAMPBELL

*Medium Sewn Flower*, 2014  
Paper, Acrylic, Packing Envelope, Thread, Acrylic,  
Spray Paint, Pencil, Rice Bags, Money, 13 x 13.5 in

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