

A black and white photograph of a man in profile, looking upwards. He is wearing a heavy, textured coat and holding a book or a stack of papers. The background is a city skyline with several tall buildings, suggesting a dense urban environment. The overall tone is contemplative and artistic.

From Babel to Pentecost

The Poetry of Pierre Emmanuel

MARY ANNE O'NEIL

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The Poetry of Pierre Emmanuel

MARY ANNE O'NEIL

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FROM BABEL TO PENTECOST

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## Introduction

I met Pierre Emmanuel once, in August 1978, in his apartment on the rue de Varenne in Paris when I was writing my doctoral dissertation on twentieth-century French religious poets. He graciously accorded me a two-hour interview to clarify the influences on his early poetry, the subject of my final chapter. I remember him as a humble and open-minded man. When I asked about the influence of the English Metaphysical poets on his work, he first answered that he had nothing in common with the Renaissance but rather had a thoroughly medieval mentality. He followed this comment with an admission that he had, in fact, translated the *Holy Sonnets* of the seventeenth-century English Metaphysical poet John Donne in his youth and, he added with a smile, had patterned much of his war poetry after Agrippa d'Aubigné, the great French baroque poet of the late sixteenth century.

When I finished my questions, it was his turn, he said. He asked first if I had any children and was sorry when I said that I did not. Then he asked about the physical landscape of my region of the United States. His face brightened when I described my small town in eastern Washington State as an agricultural area planted with wheat fields that reminded me of the Beauce region of France. He said he loved France because the mark of the human hand was everywhere present, from its rich farmlands to the sculptures of cathedral doors. His only pessimistic remark was that the French public had lost its taste for religious poetry. Waving his hand toward a copy of his long poem *Jacob*, he complained: "They see a religious title, and they refuse to read it." I reassured him that, whatever the reading habits of the French may have been, he was well known and appreciated in America, and that his reputation had spread all the way to

the rural areas of the Pacific Northwest. I am sure that this personal contact – which I later learned Emmanuel extended to all scholars of his work – did much to influence my decision to undertake a study of Emmanuel's complete poetic works for an English-speaking audience.

Emmanuel wrote on subjects ranging from social criticism, metaphysics, and history to love, nature, and the mystical experience. He successfully composed epics as well as short poems. His language ranges from everyday terms to medical and astronomical vocabulary. He mastered fixed forms, such as the sonnet, but also wrote poems several hundred pages in length. For a poet, Emmanuel was unusually successful in other genres of literature. His two-volume autobiography, *Qui est cet homme?* and *L'Ouvrier de la onzième heure*, recalls St Augustine's *Confessions* in its story of an intellectual journey that leads to a spiritual conversion. His novel, *Car enfin je vous aime*, is reminiscent of the best novels of Pierre Jean Jouve and François Mauriac in its psychically tortured protagonists. Emmanuel also wrote several volumes of essays on world poetry from the Romantic era to his own time. They are models of insightful literary criticism. In other essays, he engages in self-reflection.

In addition to being a prolific author of literary works, Emmanuel was a journalist and an engaged public intellectual, involved in educational reform in France and the defence of repressed intellectuals living in totalitarian states. In the final decade of his life, he established a multi-media library to document the history of the city of Paris. He remained faithful to the religion of his youth, Catholicism, but was, throughout his life, also a serious student of Judaism and Protestantism, and, later, Eastern religions, especially Hinduism. A translator as well as a creative writer, he was a cosmopolitan intellectual who refused to consider himself limited by his nationality, language, or time in history. His work attracted a global audience, as the translations of his prose and poetry in over a dozen foreign languages, from Rumanian to Japanese, clearly demonstrate.

Emmanuel's career as a poet lasted over forty years. His *Tombeau d'Orphée*, a long poem that combines Greek mythology, Freudian dream interpretation, and the New Testament gospels, was a *succès de scandale* with French readers and critics when it appeared in 1941 because of its daringly erotic treatment of religious themes. During the Second World War Emmanuel's poetry spoke strongly in support of his suffering nation. From 1942 to 1945, he was known as one of the most important poets of the French Resistance. He was called a prophet, an apocalyptic writer, a patriotic and politically committed artist. In the decade following the

war, however, he moved away from the Surrealist and Communist poets who had been his friends during the war, and his poetry took two very different directions. He wrote epic poems based on the Hebrew Bible. *Sodome* (1944) and *Babel* (1952) are both difficult works because of their length and their strange mixture of events from the book of *Genesis* and twentieth-century European history. He also wrote short poems during these years, works completely different from the epics in their subject matter, metres, and vocabulary. *Visage nuage* of 1955 and *Versant de l'âge* of 1958, two collections of short poems that often evoked Emmanuel's personal life, seemed to confirm a change in the direction of his career. In 1962 the Canadian critic Eva Kushner expressed confidence that Emmanuel's poetry had evolved definitively from complexity to simplicity, from a fascination with myth to an appreciation of nature and everyday life, and had achieved a purity not found in his earlier verse.<sup>1</sup>

Then, unexpectedly, between 1958 and 1970, with the exception of two commissioned volumes of short poems, Emmanuel stopped writing poetry. He became a professional *homme de lettres*, composing critical essays, giving workshops on contemporary poetry in North America, and speaking at international conferences. In 1968 his election to the French Academy, the stodgiest of French intellectual institutions, where poets were in a minority, seemed to confirm the end of his creative work. Yet, with *Jacob* (1970), Emmanuel's career as a poet began anew, and in a way his readers of the 1950s would not have predicted. *Jacob* represents a return to biblical themes and myth, but with a new emphasis on Emmanuel's personal life and the spiritual condition of contemporary humanity. It is also a very long work, but divided into sections of alternating long and short individual poems, a structure Emmanuel also uses in *Sophia* (1973), *Tu* (1978), and *Le Grand œuvre* (1984). It was *Jacob* and *Sophia* that led William Calin to suggest in 1983 that it was not possible to speak of an evolution in Emmanuel's work; it was rather an oscillation "between the long poem and collections of brief lyrics, between the elaboration of a myth-oriented, often politically militant, technically difficult verse ... and inner meditations in a much simpler, frankly elegiac form," with a synthesis of all of these different styles in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> This evaluation, however, does not explain the trilogy of the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Le Livre de l'homme et de la femme*, which is structured according to a personal numerology, with each of the three volumes containing the same number of poems, all of which use the same metre and contain the same number of verse lines. The extraordinary variety within his poetic

opus demonstrates that Emmanuel never stopped experimenting with new subjects or poetic forms and would probably have taken his work in ever newer directions had he lived longer. His biographer, Anne-Sophie Andreu, says he was still working on his final volume, *Le Grand œuvre: Cosmogonie*, in the months before his death in September 1984.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of Emmanuel's lifetime, his literary reputation underwent significant ups and downs – certainly more than other contemporary French poets experienced. Given his twelve-year break from poetry from 1958 to 1970, it is not surprising that he slipped from the French reading public's view in the 1960s and early 1970s. There were also other reasons for his temporary fall into obscurity. First, the mid-twentieth century witnessed the dominance of the novel over all other literary genres in France. Poets who retained a readership – Jacques Prévert, Yves Bonnefoy, Francis Ponge – wrote short works either in free verse or as prose poems that concentrate on the natural world or on everyday life. The vocabulary of this poetry is familiar. Not only are Emmanuel's later volumes very long and complex in their metre, but their vocabulary, often drawn from the applied sciences and medical arts, is abstruse, as are his allusions to other literatures, languages, religions, and philosophies. An education in Classical Greek and Latin literature, as well as in mythology, psychology, mathematics, and engineering, does not go amiss in approaching Pierre Emmanuel's poetry. In addition, Emmanuel expressed his Christian convictions in his poetry at the time when France was becoming increasingly secular and, as a consequence, less interested in any religious literature. A final factor that contributed to a decline in studies of his work in the 1960s and 1970s was the impossibility of associating Emmanuel with a specific literary movement. These decades were witness to the triumph of critical theories – structuralism, semiotics, existentialism, Marxism – and Emmanuel's work, with its frequent shifts of subject matter and lengthy poems, did not fit easily into such systems of thought.

The revival of interest in Emmanuel's poetry began in the 1980s. Both before and after the poet's death in 1984, scholars from the United States, France, Belgium, and Switzerland who had an interest in religious or philosophical literature were producing dissertations, book chapters, and monographs on his works.<sup>4</sup> These efforts culminated in 1994 with the creation of a literary review, the *Cahiers Pierre Emmanuel*. To date, two volumes have been published.<sup>5</sup> Most significantly, in 2003, Emmanuel's *Œuvres poétiques complètes* was published by Editions de L'Age d'Homme

in Lausanne, Switzerland. This two-volume work, under the direction of François Livi, brings together for the first time the entire corpus of Emmanuel's poetry, and provides detailed biographical information and the most complete bibliography of secondary sources ever compiled, along with helpful introductions and notes. Livi and his team of young scholars have laid the foundation for all future studies of Emmanuel, and I am indebted to them.

My goal in the present study is to present Pierre Emmanuel's poetry to an English-speaking audience. Emmanuel had many ties to England and America. He spent part of his childhood in the United States, where his parents had emigrated, and later taught at universities on the east coasts of the United States and Canada. In the mid-1940s he worked in the English and American sectors of French radio. In the years following the Second World War, he met and discussed poetry with T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas and, in his later years, he befriended the English poet Brian Merrikan Hill, who became his translator. English religious poets, from John Donne in the seventeenth century to Gerard Manley Hopkins in the late nineteenth century were among his favourites.

To make Emmanuel's work more accessible to an English-speaking audience, I have translated all of his prose and verse that I quote. I have adopted the practical definition of translation formulated by the American linguist and biblical scholar Eugene Nida: "Translating consists in producing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning and secondly in style."<sup>6</sup> In my English versions, I have tried to convey the meaning of Emmanuel's poetry, as I understand it, while respecting his vocabulary, complex syntax, and use of punctuation and capital letters, as well as the appearance on the page of the lines and stanzas of the original French. I have made no attempt to translate Emmanuel's metres or rhymes, but I do address both rhyme and metre in my analyses of the poetry. Unlike English poetry, which is measured in feet of stressed and unstressed syllables, French poetry stresses each syllable. In order to avoid an unnecessary discussion of the fine points of French metre, I simply state the number of syllables in the lines of poetry I quote or note Emmanuel's use of fixed poetic forms, such as the sonnet or the ballad.

I have arranged my study chronologically and by category. Chapter 1 introduces Emmanuel's three most important works of the 1940s, *Le Poète et son Christ*, *Tombeau d'Orphée*, and *Le Poète fou*. These early volumes explore three of the poet's ongoing preoccupations – with Christ, sexuality,

and the poet's vocation – all of which followed Emmanuel throughout his life. Chapter 2 concentrates on poetry written during and immediately after the Second World War, and the third considers his three epics, composed on themes from the Hebrew Bible – *Sodome* (1944), *Babel* (1951), and *Jacob* (1970). The fourth chapter treats all of Emmanuel's short poetry written from the 1940s until 1970. Chapter 5 studies the long volumes of the 1970s, *Sophia* and *Tu*; and the last chapter analyses Emmanuel's final poetic works, *Le Livre de l'homme et de la femme* and *Le Grand œuvre: Cosmogonie*, in the context of his entire opus. To give some idea of the history of the publication of Emmanuel's works, I refer to the original edition of each book and note second editions or volumes of collected poems whenever they exist. The endnotes indicate where each book of poetry appears in the *Œuvres poétiques complètes* of 2003.

Although no one has yet written a complete biography of Pierre Emmanuel, several scholars have included biographical data in their studies of his work.<sup>7</sup> Since events in Emmanuel's life, such as the Second World War, had a decisive influence on his choice of subjects, I have included such information in every chapter, but I have not gone into the details of his personal life because they are not particularly helpful in interpreting his poetry. Emmanuel's experiences in childhood and public life no more account for his symbolism and metres than Baudelaire's venereal disease explains the sensual beauty of *Les Fleurs du mal*. I have, however, referred often to Emmanuel's prose writings, which he published regularly during four decades and certainly intended as guides to his poetry. His *Autobiographies* and his Introduction to Alain Bosquet's *Pierre Emmanuel* (1959) give the main literary and philosophical influences on his poetry from 1938 until 1952. Beginning with *Poésie Raison Ardente* of 1948 and continuing until *Une Année de grâce* of 1981–82, his collected essays provide a record of the development of his conceptions of poetry and the poet's mission. From the late 1940s, he also wrote explanatory prefaces to most of his books, and later added notes on the back covers of his final volumes. Emmanuel's prose writings have been an invaluable resource, and I have acknowledged their importance in every chapter.

T.S. Eliot, in his 1930 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," describes the traditional poet as an artist with an acute sense of history: "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature

of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.”<sup>8</sup> I know of no twentieth-century French poet who better fits Eliot’s definition of the traditional writer than Pierre Emmanuel. He knew the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelations. He studied Greek mythology and philosophy, and read both English and German literature in the original languages. His penchant for epic poetry led him to study the European epics from Virgil to Milton and French verse narratives not only of the medieval period but of the Renaissance and nineteenth century. Such erudition makes him unusual among French poets of the mid-twentieth century; but it also presents problems for the reader less well versed in the history of European literature, who may find Emmanuel’s allusions to philosophy, theology, and other literatures confusing. In an effort to introduce his poetry to a readership not as familiar with classical literary and religious texts as Emmanuel himself was, I have explained the allusions, as I understand them. I have tried not only to draw parallels between Emmanuel’s interests and those of earlier writers but also to indicate when his poetry reveals the influence of another poet’s style and when he imitates metres or stanzas from other poetry. My goal is to allow the reader to appreciate better what Eliot calls in the same essay “an experience different in kind from any experience not of art;”<sup>9</sup> that is, an aesthetic satisfaction encompassing the emotions and the intellect. I believe Emmanuel intended his readers to experience such aesthetic satisfaction.

The approach I have outlined in the previous paragraph is “intertextuality;” that is, the study of the presence of other writers and other texts in a writer’s works. Besides demonstrating Emmanuel’s connections to world literature and philosophy, this method requires close readings of the poetry, and close readings are the only way to do justice to Emmanuel’s complex verse. Given the prevalence of symbolism in his opus, I also refer to several schools of psychoanalytic criticism to elucidate Emmanuel’s poetry. Freud’s theories of dream interpretation and the structure of the psyche are especially helpful in analysing the imagery of the early poems, written at a time when Emmanuel, like the Surrealists and his mentor Pierre Jean Jouve, were studying Freud. Beginning in the 1950s, when Emmanuel was attracted to myths and archetypes, his poetry reveals the influence of his contemporary, the philosopher and literary

theorist Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard is best known for the attention he pays to dreams and the imagination, as well as to the evocation of the symbolism of the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire in *L'Eau et les rêves* [Water and Dreams] and *La Psychanalyse du feu* [The Psychoanalysis of Fire].<sup>10</sup> By 1970 Emmanuel's interest had shifted to the archetypal studies of Carl Jung, and his final works incorporate Jung's notions of the collective unconscious, the male and female principles of *animus* and *anima*, alchemy, and the occult.

Emmanuel also subscribed to a much earlier system of symbolism used in biblical exegesis: typological, or figural, symbolism. A grounding in this symbolism is essential for understanding Emmanuel's surprising juxtapositions of characters and events drawn from the Bible, twentieth-century history and culture, and his personal life. Typological symbolism is, briefly, a way of reading the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible as a unified story of sin and redemption with applications to Christian moral conduct in this world as well as to the quest for eternal salvation. This method of approaching the Bible had its origin in Paul's Epistle to the Romans (3:29), where the apostle proclaims that the God of Moses is the god not only of the Jews alone but also of the Gentiles. Paul lays the groundwork for reading the stories of Genesis, Exodus, and the prophets symbolically, as "a series of prefigurations of Christ, of his incarnation and passion, and of the foundation of the Christian Church."<sup>11</sup> Typological symbolism operates on four levels: literal, allegorical, moral or tropological, and anagogical or mystical, and invites us to read the stories of Genesis and Exodus not only as historical truth but also as allegories of Christ's life, guides for moral conduct, and pre-figurations of the Second Coming. This system of explication, elaborated in the early years of Christianity, became widely accepted during the Middle Ages in Europe.<sup>12</sup> It is found throughout Catholic liturgy, as well as in medieval sculpture and painting, and, as the German philologist Erich Auerbach has explained in his study of Dante, in medieval poetry.<sup>13</sup> No other twentieth-century French poet demonstrates as well as Emmanuel what Northrop Frye calls this "impact of the Bible on the creative imagination."<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel's initial exposure to the Bible came through the Latin mass as celebrated in Catholic churches during his childhood and, later, through his readings of the religious poets of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and twentieth century – poets such as Dante, Donne, and d'Aubigné, but also Claudel and Jouve, all of whom subscribed to the typological tradition. Emmanuel

did not approach the Bible as a theologian or a linguist. For him, as for Dante, it contained the fundamental truths of human history and expressed these truths through imagery that was timeless and universally comprehensible.

Although Emmanuel harks back to earlier European poetic traditions, he is very much a writer of his century. The poetry of the first half of his career, from 1938 to 1958, reflects all the major trends in French poetry from the turn of the twentieth century until the 1960s. His first volumes, *Le Poète et son Christ*, *Tombeau d'Orphée*, and *Le Poète fou*, reveal traits of two early twentieth-century movements, Symbolism and Surrealism. During his university years in the 1930s, Emmanuel read the late-Symbolists, notably the poet Paul Valéry and the novelist André Gide. The influence of Symbolism accounts for Emmanuel's interest in Greek mythology, his nostalgia for a lost Golden Age, his quest for a pure poetic language and nuanced imagery, and, above all, his belief that symbols were the essence of poetic language. The 1920s and 1930s in France also witnessed the Surrealist movement, with its emphasis on the liberation of the unconscious through automatic writing and the recuperation of imagery from dreams. In the late 1930s, Pierre Jean Jouve, who was not a Surrealist but, like the Surrealists, was inspired by Freud, initiated Emmanuel into a poetry based on dream interpretation and the recognition of unconscious desires, a poetry that shocked readers with its frank presentation of sexuality. All three of the early volumes, especially *Tombeau d'Orphée*, can be considered verse psychodramas that bring subconscious conflicts and eroticism to the surface.

During the war, when Emmanuel moved to the South of France to escape the German occupation of Paris, he met and became close friends with several prominent Surrealists who had Communist sympathies. Through his associations with Louis Aragon, Elsa Triolet, and Paul Eluard, he came to understand poetry as an act of political resistance as well as a communal effort, a celebration of friendship and love for one's suffering countrymen. Like these poets, Emmanuel became patriotic and declared his sentiments in impassioned verse.

By the mid-1950s, he was composing shorter poems in simple vocabulary designed to convey the spiritual force and sensual beauty of nature and the ephemerality of human experience, as did Patrice de la Tour du Pin, René Char, and Yves Bonnefoy in the 1960s and 1970s. Emmanuel never went as far as another contemporary poet, Francis Ponge, to concentrate uniquely on the objective description of ordinary things, but his

short poetry of the 1940s moves away from the development of symbols to an appreciation of everyday reality and the concrete objects that connect us to this world.

All the symbolism, dream imagery, and awareness of ordinary experience found in the volumes written between 1940 and 1958 still appear in the later poetry, written between 1970 and 1984. In the final years of his career, however, Emmanuel seemed also to be experimenting with the techniques of visual, or concrete poetry, a pan-European movement that began in the second decade of the twentieth century and continues into today's computer age. Visual poets arrange letters, words, or whole lines of verse into pictures that fuse form and meaning. *Sophia* can be considered a visual poem in which the different sections of individual poems imitate, verbally, the structure of a Byzantine cathedral. *Tu* and *Le Grand œuvre* contain short poems in which lines of verse are arranged to resemble the shape of a mirror. Words and letters in differently sized fonts add to the new importance Emmanuel accords the physical appearance of words on the page. Finally, Emmanuel's emphasis on communal song and chant in *Sophia* and *Tu* suggests that he was conscious of the appeal of contemporary popular music, what Calin calls the "pseudo-popular tradition" of poetic song represented in the 1950s and 1960s by Georges Brassens, Jacques Prévert, and Boris Vian in France,<sup>15</sup> as well as by Bob Dylan in the United States and Leonard Cohen in Canada. His inclusion of the actual words of Latin hymns and of syllables used in Buddhist meditation reminds us of the ancient and universal origins of poetry in music.

It is also helpful to recognize Emmanuel's connections to the *renouveau catholique*, the influential trend in French intellectual life that immediately followed the First World War.<sup>16</sup> The theorists of this Catholic Revival, principally the philosophers Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, saw no conflict between traditional Catholic doctrine and modern art's fascination with contemporary urban life or love of formal experimentation. They underlined the catholicity, or universality, of Catholicism, emphasizing the agreements, rather than the divisions, among all religions and philosophies. For them, Catholicism was central to the survival of European civilization, and Catholic artists and thinkers had the power to bring about the spiritual regeneration of society.<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel was familiar with these ideas from his study of philosophy and theology at the University of Lyon in the 1930s. He also loved the poetry of Baudelaire and

the prose of Léon Bloy, two nineteenth-century precursors of the Catholic Revival.<sup>18</sup> His poetry of the 1940s had already brought unconventional subject matter and imagery into poetry based on the Bible, as did the work of most Catholic poets of the early twentieth century (Péguy, Claudel, Jouve, and Jacob, for instance). It is really after 1960, following his break with French Communist intellectuals at the end of the Resistance and his increasing involvement with Catholic intellectuals throughout Europe and North America, that Emmanuel's subject matter reflects most clearly the principal tenets of the *renouveau catholique*.

In his poetry of the 1970s, the connections among the fine arts, from painting to music to literature, become a dominant theme. In *Sophia* and *Tu*, he stresses the beliefs common to all world religions – Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism – as well as the themes and imagery common to the sacred texts that express these beliefs. While recognizing the universal need for religious faith, Emmanuel promotes Christianity as the only appropriate and most effective antidote to twentieth-century atheism and materialism, in his opinion the most pernicious diseases affecting European society of his time. His final volume, *Le Grand œuvre*, unabashedly declares his faith in the ability of poetry to recall his countrymen to their spiritual roots. Emmanuel is unique among late-twentieth-century French religious poets in retaining this sense of the civilizing role of Christian art, a dominant idea of the Catholic Revival.

In 1885 Stéphane Mallarmé, the founder of Symbolism, declared that France was undergoing a “*crise de vers*,” a revolution in verse that was freeing French poetry from the strictures of traditional metre and restoring the musicality of language. For Mallarmé, the modern poet should no longer engage in the representation of reality or moral instruction but rather conduct the reader into the realm of pure art.<sup>19</sup> In 1985 the poet and critic Henri Meschonnic wrote of a very different crisis in French poetry. The century-long argument over metre and imagery had reduced poetry to a sub-category of linguistics; the poet had become the representation of the isolated artist who wrote incomprehensible verse to alienate unsophisticated readers.<sup>20</sup>

As a literary critic as well as a poet, Emmanuel was conscious of the devaluation poetry had undergone during the twentieth century and of the misconceptions that had caused this decline. In his four decades of writing poetry, in addition to addressing matters of poetic language,

especially imagery and metre, he also posed philosophical questions about the ethical responsibilities of the poet and the poet's ability to speak for the community. Attuned to each decade in which he lived, Emmanuel understood the power of poetry to clarify the human condition, to teach, and to persuade. It is my hope that this study will enable readers to rediscover, through Emmanuel, the continuing richness and relevance of French poetry.

## I

# The Early Poems, 1938–1944

In *Qui est cet homme?*, the first volume of his autobiography, Pierre Emmanuel gives a detailed account of his birth as a poet. He had begun writing in the late 1930s, at the same time as he started his teaching career in a secondary school in Cherbourg. The novelist and poet Pierre Jean Jouve, whom he had sought as a mentor, generously read and critiqued his early verse. His judgment was not favourable. Emmanuel's verse, he told the budding poet, lacked personality – contained no ideas; it was nothing but a pastiche of other poets. This brutal honesty proved salutary, and when Emmanuel took up his pen again after six months of silence, he composed a short religious poem that both he and Jouve recognized as a truly inspired work.<sup>1</sup> From that day in 1938 until his death almost five decades later, Pierre Emmanuel made poetry his life's work.

Although *Le Poète et son Christ, 1938* [The Poet and His Christ] (1942) is not Emmanuel's first published collection of poetry, it corresponds to his earliest inspiration.<sup>2</sup> This volume contains "Christ au Tombeau" [Christ in the Tomb] and "Rédemption" [Redemption], the poems that confirmed his poetic vocation and the first works to be signed with the pseudonym Pierre Emmanuel (*Aut.*, 187–97). The subtitle "1938" draws our attention to the year of their composition as the beginning of Emmanuel's literary career. In a series of separate poems, some several pages in length and others a page or even shorter, *Le Poète et son Christ* retells the Passion of Christ, following closely the evangelist John's account, which begins with the story of the adulterous woman and ends with Christ's appearance to the disciples at Emmaus. The original version of 1942 and the augmented edition of 1946 integrate into this interpre-

tation of the Redemption pieces on the poet's mystical aspirations as well as discussions of religion in the twentieth century.

Emmanuel is only one of many twentieth-century French poets to find inspiration in the Bible. Paul Claudel, who wrote plays and poetry based on the New Testament, and Charles Péguy, the author of long poems on the Virgin and female saints, are certainly the best-known Catholic poets of the century's early decades. Several Catholic poets were active in the 1930s as the Second World War loomed. Max Jacob, the Surrealist and convert to Catholicism, composed verse meditations on sin and Christ. Pierre Jean Jouve reinterpreted the Apocalypse in *Kyrie* of 1938 and *La Résurrection des morts* [The Resurrection of the Dead] (1939). Patrice de la Tour du Pin, a translator of the Latin mass into French after the Second Vatican Council, paraphrased the psalms. During the war years and into the 1960s, biblical allusions appeared in the works of secular as well as religious poets, from the Resistance fighter Jean Cayrol to the priest Jean Grosjean.

What distinguishes *Le Poète et son Christ* from other religious poetry of the same period is the way the structure of the collection and the style of the poems hark back to a much earlier poetic tradition, the meditative verse of the late Renaissance composed under the influence of Counter-Reformation devotional practices outlined by the founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola. This type of verse, exemplified by Donne and Herbert in England, Sponde and La Ceppède in France, Góngora and Quevedo in Spain, attempted to recreate a biblical scene, then to analyse the theological importance of the scene and, finally, to apply the knowledge gained from this meditation to the poet's own life, often through prayer. The structure of *Le Poète et son Christ* resembles especially that of Jean de La Ceppède's *Théorèmes* [Theorems], a four-volume sonnet sequence written between 1613 and 1631, in which separate poems evoke the stages of the Passion in chronological order. Emmanuel's style more nearly recalls that of Donne in the *Holy Sonnets*. Like Donne's verse, this poetry is highly dramatic, sensual, and emotional; it is dense in its use of complex imagery, irony, and paradox and calls upon the intellect as well as the imagination.<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel's education in the Catholic schools of Lyon, his study of Catholic and Protestant theology during his university years, and his readings in the poetry of Claudel, Jouve, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross, and the modern English Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins certainly contributed to his development of the type of religious poetry to which his mind and emotions already inclined him.<sup>4</sup>

*Le Poète et son Christ* opens with “Soliloque d’un Pharisien” [A Pharisee’s Soliloquy], which introduces the notion of poetry as spiritual exercise:

Pétrifiée par le sel des miroirs  
 L’Ame-statue meut lourdement ses masses d’ombre  
 en de calmes perspectives ouvrant sur dieu  
 mais fausses  
     car le jeu des glaces et des yeux  
 n’éclaire point de l’intérieur les très profondes  
 solitudes qui sont le tain de ces miroirs (*PC*, 13)<sup>5</sup>

[Turned into stone by the mirror’s salt  
 The Soul-statue sluggishly moves its masses of shadow  
 onto calm perspectives opening toward god  
 but they are false  
     for the exchange between mirrors and eyes  
 doesn’t illuminate the very deep, inner  
 solitude that forms the reflective surface of these mirrors].

These lines illustrate Emmanuel’s tendency to use imagery from a variety of religious and secular sources. The salt and the petrification come from the story of Lot’s wife in Genesis 19. The Pharisee is the hypocritical enemy of Christ in the gospels. The mirror recalls Freudian theory as well as the Surrealist poetry of Paul Éluard, especially the poem “Le Miroir d’un moment” [The Mirror of a Moment] of 1926, in which the mirror suggests an interpretation both as the subconscious and as poetry. The poet condemns himself as a Pharisee, someone too sure of his understanding of God to risk actually re-reading the scriptures. At the same time, he recognizes that his false self-confidence simply alienates him further from God and humanity. This poem evokes the seventeenth-century Christian moralist Blaise Pascal, and his concept of *divertissement*, or distraction, through which the soul masks its despair. It also gives a sense of the soul’s misery at being separated from God. The poet tries to bridge the distance between himself and God by confronting his spiritual emptiness.

Emmanuel then begins his retelling of the Passion with the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). The depiction of the woman’s sin is graphic. The Pharisees interrupt the couple as they make love. The

Pharisees appear less interested in defending Jewish law than in attacking Christ through the woman. Their hatred of the saviour verges on madness: “Ah! LE confondre ... ils rient de jouisseuse attente: / que la haine en leur bouche est pulpeuse!” [Ah! A chance to trap HIM! ... they laugh in sensuous expectation: how palpable is the hatred in their eyes!] (*PC*, 22). Emmanuel constructs the story cinematically. His eye discovers the characters and follows their actions. He recreates the encounter between the woman and the Pharisees in physical detail. The adulterous woman’s naked thighs sink into the ground under her partner’s weight. The Pharisees surround her, screaming and salivating like wild dogs preparing to devour their prey. The men loom as shadows over their victim; a wind shakes the trees as if in reprobation. The adulterous woman smells the Pharisees’ bloodthirstiness:

une odeur  
d’hommes lui monte sur le dos, étalon fauve  
qui l’êtreint des jarrets et cherche à la forcer (*PC*, 22)

[an odour  
of men climbs up her back, tawny stallion  
that holds her down with its knees and tries to force her].

Emmanuel plays up the suspense of the scene. The adulterous woman prostrates herself at the feet of a silent Christ, who allows the Pharisees to fantasize the woman’s stoning but refuses to write the words of pardon in the ground until the accusers truly threaten action:

Longtemps! La paix est intenable. Les coeurs durs  
dont le ressentiment est la gangue, ce calme  
les fait trembler dans leur alvéole de fer.  
Jésus, les yeux baissés, comme par jeu dessine  
des figures d’enfant sur le sable (*PC*, 25)

[Such a long time! The quiet is unbearable. Those hard hearts held in a matrix of resentment, this calm makes them shake in their alveolus of iron. Jesus, with lowered eyes, draws, as if he were playing, childish figures in the sand].

The story includes, but does not end with, the words of the gospel: “Que celui d’entre vous qui n’a jamais péché lui jette la première pierre”<sup>6</sup> [He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her]<sup>7</sup> (John 8:6–7). As the Pharisees disperse, the adulterous woman transforms herself into a temple virgin who dances in thanksgiving to Christ. Emmanuel does not allow himself or the reader to savour this moment, however. The last lines imagine the crucified Christ mourned by the Magdalene, another forgiven female sinner forced to confront the cost of her redemption.

In “La Femme adultère” [The Adulterous Woman] Emmanuel considers which human failings admit of redemption. The Pharisees are the least interesting characters because their obsession with the law and their certainty of moral superiority have petrified them spiritually, a condition symbolized by the rocks they grasp to stone the prostitute. The woman incarnates sexuality, which Emmanuel regards in this poem as natural but unacceptable; her pleasure with her male companion is mixed with shame even before the Pharisees appear. She offers her naked body to Christ, but before she can approach her saviour she must be cleansed of desire. In this initial poem, erotic love cannot co-exist with love of God. Christ, a brooding figure, ever aware of the cross that awaits him on Golgotha, remains distant and silent until the moment when he writes in the sand the phrase that saves the adulterous woman. This god of few, but highly effective, words represents the poet Emmanuel aspires to be.

The imagery of the poem is simple, drawn predominantly from nature. Trees, birds, earth, and rocks play an important role in this and all of Emmanuel’s poetry. He also uses technical terms – here “gangué,” the worthless mineral matter joined to the ore of more valuable metals, and “alveolus,” the cell of a beehive – to express the exact nuance of spiritual rigidity and isolation. His tendency to assimilate human characters to nature can be confusing. The adulterous woman first appears as a garden; her undulating hips are trees and her hair, algae floating on a pond. The faces of the Pharisees surface like bubbles in mud. Christ is an orchard swept by wind. This type of imagery, which evokes movement and metamorphosis, recalls French baroque literature, especially the poetry of the seventeenth-century French poet St Amant. It also demonstrates that in refusing to separate the physical from the spiritual, Emmanuel is equally a poet of nature and of religion.

In the Gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection of Christ. The seven poems of the second section, “Lazare ressuscitant” [Lazarus Rising from the Dead], focus less on the return from the grave than on the experience of dying. The initial piece, “O Arbre limoneux” [O Tree of Clay], draws upon the tradition of biblical exegesis that links the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden to the cross of the Crucifixion. The “limon,” or clay, referred to in the title is not earth but death, which has turned the created world into a graveyard over which first Lazarus, then Christ, must triumph. In a conceit reminiscent of Donne or T.S. Eliot, Emmanuel imagines the Christ who walks into Judaea to revive his friend Lazarus (John: 11) as an Olympic swimmer advancing through the waves of a sea formed by gravestones, his pulsing blood illuminating the dark surface of the sea-cemetery:

Nageur, avec le mol assentiment des ombres  
 et porté par le rythme aboli de son coeur  
 jusqu'aux crêtes des monts écumeux qui se brisent  
 sur les temples inachevés et les tombeaux  
 frêles barques emplies de sang très haut sombrées  
 il avance à brassées mortelles vers le Jour (*PC*, 31)

[Swimmer, helped by the passive consent of the shadows  
 and carried by the suppressed rhythms of his heart  
 to the very crests of the frothy mountains that break  
 on unfinished temples and tombs  
 fragile boats filled with blood, plunged from on high into the depths  
 by mortal breaststrokes, he moves toward the Day].

If the first poem is optimistic, the following ones are morbid and violent. Lazarus, the “délégué de Christ en agonie” [Christ’s delegate in agony] (*PC*, 33), must experience the full horror of death, which includes the separation of soul from flesh followed by a dizzying plunge from the upper world into dark silence: “Alors Lazare bute au vide et meurt sans fin” [Then Lazarus stumbles over the emptiness and dies endlessly] (*PC*, 36). Christ, who appears in the fourth poem, “Béthanie au matin” [Bethany in the Morning], seems unaware of the immensity of the task to which he is called: Lazarus’s sepulchre forms part of a peaceful desert landscape, as if to suggest that death is part of the natural order. Only when Christ utters Lazarus’s name in “Christ appelle le sang” [Christ

Calls Forth Blood], does he realize that he challenges death itself. In a nightmarish vision of his blood dripping from the sky onto earth and sea, Christ recognizes the full significance of his impending crucifixion:

pleure pleure car je vais naître de mon Sang  
 pleure car je suis mort et couché en mon Sang  
 je ne reconnais plus en mon Sang mes os rouges  
 d'entre les rouges os de cet antique mort (*PC*, 39)

[weep, weep, for I am going to be born of my Blood  
 cry, for I am dead and laid in my Blood  
 in my Blood I can no longer distinguish my red bones  
 from the red bones of this ancient dead man].

These poems are noteworthy for the irony and paradox Emmanuel brings into play. The lush garden landscape of the graveyard contrasts sharply with the darkness and silence that Lazarus experiences inside the tomb. When Christ calls upon Lazarus to return to the world, he actually calls death upon himself. In one of the most surprising moments, the embrace that Christ accords the Lazarus he has just resurrected turns into a hostile clutch: Lazarus passes on a sentence of death, which Christ angrily resists:

Tout se passe en de féroces profondeurs.  
 Qui donc consommera le crime, de Lazare  
 ou de Christ? La haine entre eux chante lorsque debout  
 ils s'étreignent au petit jour de la vie neuve  
 ils s'éteignent dans leur ténèbre dévastée  
 Christ blafard figurant un mort et la senteur  
 de Ses péchés étant si forte qu'Il tressaille  
 Lazare consumant la cire de sa mort  
 et cherchant à tatons le soleil (*PC*, 42–3)

[Everything takes place at savage depths.  
 Which one will consummate the crime, Lazarus  
 or Christ? The hatred between them sings out when, erect,  
 they clutch each other at the daybreak of this new life  
 they fade away in their ravaged shadow  
 Christ pale, looking like a dead man, and the smell

of His sins so strong that he winces  
 Lazarus burning up the candle of his death  
 and groping for the sun].

This battle between Christ and Lazarus clarifies the title of the final piece of the section, “Résurrection imparfaite” [Imperfect Resurrection], for any single triumph over death is meaningless until death itself has been eradicated, and such a miracle requires Christ to die. Emmanuel often uses puns, in a manner reminiscent of Donne in the *Holy Sonnets*, to explore the theological implications of a scene. Thus, Lazarus sees Christ as a mirror of “le vieux christ” [the old Christ], Adam. The fifth poem, “Unique nom la mort” [Unique Name of Death], ends with the word “l’Amour” [love], suggesting that the death resulting from original sin will be conquered by the divine love granted to humanity on Golgotha. Irony and paradox not only increase the drama of the meditation but are essential to Emmanuel’s interpretation of the Passion: if Christ truly became human he must have approached death humanly, in confusion and terror, and with great reluctance.

At times Emmanuel’s images metamorphose rapidly and seamlessly. In the initial poem, “O Arbre limoneux,” the hands of the saviour-swimmer cutting through the waves become the roots of vegetation in the garden cemetery. Christ’s pounding heart in “Christ appelle le Sang” becomes a hot red sun flooding the graveyard with terrifying light. Among the numerous recurrent images, trees and blood are the most common. The tree symbolizes Adam’s sin and the redemption of this sin; at the same time it symbolizes Christ and, to some extent, Lazarus. In “Résurrection imparfaite,” the dual tree formed by the embrace of Christ and Lazarus symbolizes the struggle between flesh and spirit, the simultaneous but contradictory attractions to death and life. Blood represents sacrifice, but it also suggests resurrection. Emmanuel’s choice of imagery underscores the richness of the paradoxes and ambiguities of the gospel story.

The following three poems, titled “Gethsémani” [Gethsemane], are a meditation by Christ, who has now become the central figure and narrator. As an agitated Christ reviews the history of sin, a cypress catches fire in a prefiguration of the immolation on Golgotha. The trees, rocks, and mountains surrounding the garden change into aggressive beasts ready to devour Christ. The night winds tear away Christ’s clothing to leave him naked against the night sky, which dawn finally slits open as if with a sword. Auditory imagery accompanies the visual. Emmanuel recreates