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René Char: Everything Must Begin Again Always

The Brittle Age and Returning Upland, by René Char. Gustaf Sobin, trans.
Denver: Counterpath Press, 2009.

René Char occupies a place that is quietly but utterly integral to the poetics and the historical turns of the 20th century. His experience would be enough to suggest this: Surrealist involvement, war, participation in the French Resistance, the dawn of the nuclear age. But the depth and freshness of his writing go beyond the avant-garde spirit or any other crises or trends of his moment. Rather, it is his individual poetic and philosophical dialogue with the physical and human world around him that creates a language that renews itself as we turn the page or even as we reread. He inhabited and thought through the landscape and land of his native Vaucluse. He engages a lucid view of history that takes place where traces of human events mix with the temporal scale of geology and nature. His thinking resists the conclusiveness of fixed forms.

The Brittle Age and Returning Upland, published this year in a bilingual edition with Gustaf Sobin's translation by Counterpath Press, are well-paired works (they ended up anthologized by Char in separate volumes), conveying a sense of a time and a place, as their titles suggest, that slowly unfolds through a compact and meditative language. Sobin's translation is of the 1965 editions (published by José Corti) of these works, and the Counterpath edition restores the original ample formatting of *The Brittle Age*, when the volume stood alone and each short prose piece had its own page, allowing space for its complexities to expand more fully.¹ *Returning Upland*, unlike the compressed lan-

1. *L'âge cassant* would later be included as the closing text of the 1971 edition of Char's *Recherche de la base et du sommet* as a single series of aphorisms, appearing as a poem over two pages. That volume (*RBS*) makes a searching assessment of the depths and the hopes for alliances of the cataclysmic years of the mid-century, and the placement of *L'âge cassant* there indicates its weight as a meditation on the labyrinth of history. *Retour amont* (*Returning Upland*), when it appeared later as part of *Le nu perdu* (1971) would no longer contain the epigraph by Bataille; "Venasque" had migrated there from *The Brittle Age*; one other poem, "Le Mur d'enceinte et la Rivière," was added; and "The Merciful Thirst" was given the title "Yvonne," the original title preserved as a subtitle.

guage of *The Brittle Age*, opens out to prose and verse poems and allows a different flowering of thought through the elements of the land: a poplar in a storm, two roses strangely linked by an iron ring, the river Sorgue, fallen fruit, tombs at a Romanesque church. In the "brittle age," and in the dry "upland" above rivers' sources, Char dialogues with traces of human loss left in the landscape, but feels the "viaticum" of thinking through them and finds an adjacent promise.

Gustaf Sobin came to live in the South of France in 1963, and in the context of his own commitment to this land and its history, and of his conversations with René Char, made these translations. Sobin's brief glossary made to accompany the poems keys us in to some of the rich historical and geographical associations with the places mentioned in Char's poems; Sobin also explored the South of France in his own essays, the last volume of which was also published by Counterpath Press (*Aura*, 2009).² Light, color, the life of a stone quarry beneath the castle that was built symbiotically above it—through these subjects and others, Sobin looks for the sense and substance of areas of past human experience that still manifest themselves in the evidence of remains and archives. His 1988 preface to the translations of *The Brittle Age* and *Returning Upland* evokes Char's language for its special resonance with the world, and even suggests that this quality is something that could translate him out of an American context that he, Sobin, found more limited in 1963:

The poem as response, as vector, as the vehicle of an irreversible human affirmation: here, indeed, was heady stuff for a young American, emerging out of a society (and thus a linguistics) dominated by the monophonics of the individual self. ("Translator's Preface," x)³

Perhaps that "vector" of response is related to what Char once named the "swerve of Time of the artist" (literally the "loop"—"la boucle du Temps artiste").⁴ The swerve might be a detour that time makes

2. The first two volumes, *Luminous Debris* and *Ladder of Shadows*, were published by University of California Press in 1999 and 2009, respectively.

3. References to Counterpath's edition of Char's *The Brittle Age* and *Returning Upland* will hereafter appear as page numbers placed parenthetically in the text.

4. René Char, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1983, 803. Hereafter cited in the text as *OC*.

through things and through creation. Ideas, events, and history would be known by the poet only as they traverse a world, phenomenal and in time. Char's writing follows that swerve, reflecting on experience through language and through material presences, thus ensuring that thought and image are conscious of the places that ground them. In Char's written world, elements mutually inform one another and assure the material reach of words. Evidence that Char believed in art's response—made through a swerve—comes up again in a text dated both 1944 and 1967:

Art ignores History but uses its terror. The events of our existence, the banditism of societies, make the gravel-heap of rubble and iron that assure its foundations.⁵

History is present but as a formless heap of rubble from the destructions wrought by human instruments, a heap that has no order but that nevertheless has settled geologically so as to create a substratum for Art. History with its capital H suggests not only events but the narratives constructed around them. Impatient with (ignoring or refusing to know) those constructed stories, Art responds instead to the elemental leftovers, silt of human tragedy, that have leaked downward and melded together.

Char had a chance to know terror. After the defeat of France in 1940, he was soon organizing the beginnings of a Resistance group in the Basses-Alpes, the mountainous region of the South of France above his native town, Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. As "Captain Alexander," he commanded a group that, among other things, prepared to receive parachute and airplane landings of men and munitions for the Resistance on fields that they had located and prepared for this purpose. Char's wartime writing (*Seuls demeurent* and *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, published in

5. "L'Art ignore l'Histoire mais se sert de sa terreur. Les événements de notre existence, le banditisme des sociétés, font l'amas de gravier de décombres et de fer qui assure ses fondations" (René Char, "Outrages," Alger 1944, Paris 1967, *OC* 651.) This statement is part of a critique of the workings of power that Char wrote from Algiers, where the Allied Command had called him against his will in July 1944, away from his local Resistance work, whose authenticity he preferred to the more calculated politics of the High Command and General de Gaulle. See Rod Kedward, *France and the French: A Modern History* (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2005: 302–9), for a discussion of the Liberation of Paris and de Gaulle's role in marginalizing the Resistance in favor of establishing new government order.

1945 and 1946, respectively) inspired postwar readers for its connections of poetry, action, and history. But Char, who had glimpsed the "treasure" of a political society in the shared action of the Resistance, was bitterly disillusioned by the injustices of the purge and the political disappointments following the Liberation of France, when French society returned to "the old empty strife of conflicting ideologies [. . .]"⁶ Thus the poet-Resister writes, in a text dated 1948, of a lost hope ("we cannot prolong an exceptional climate") and an age of base strategies ("strategists are the wound of this world and its bad breath. [. . .] They grant the name of Historical science to the falsified consciousness that makes them [. . .] project the darkness of their chaos as the light of Knowledge").⁷

Serious illness threatened Char in the early 1960s, and personal thoughts about death, along with the complexity of the wartime and post-war past echo when, in 1965, Char announces a "brittle age":

I was born, like the rock, with my wounds. Uncured of my superstitious youth, my limpid firmness exhausted, I entered the brittle age. (3)

The poet's age, our age, has a geological scale, but human wounds and human time (birth, youth) leave their mark there. The poet's knowing comes from the world ("The flowering hawthorne was my first alphabet" [27]), and his "superstitious youth" will be matched by a *reality* made clear by candlelight:

In the present state of the world we stretch, above reality, a candle of untainted blood, and we sleep outside of sleep. (5)

Violence has changed the poet but so has love, as the double meaning in the homophones "Tuer m'a [. . .] / Tu es ma [. . .]" shows:

6. This phrase is Hannah Arendt's: see her "Preface" to her *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, 1968. Arendt builds this preface partly around Char and the particular way his wartime poetry captured the "treasure" of the shared action of the Resistance, as well as his own consciousness that this treasure would be lost after the Liberation.

7. From a letter to Francis Curel that Char published in *Recherche de la base et du sommet (Oeuvres complètes, 637, translation mine)*.

To kill has unsteeled me forever.
You're my unsteeled one, forever.
Which one should we read? (39)

Mary Ann Caws tells us that

[. . .]speaking of the title of the collection *L'Age cassant*, René Char points out that the term "cassant" is applied to the branches of some fruit trees, as if to portend the heaviness of the fruit to come or in witness to what has been.⁸

Brittle, breaking, fruitful: Char depicts human time as so many opposed contradictions. In another instance, he opposes the frightening lack of progress towards a known end, with a certainty of becoming:

What was, no longer is. What isn't must become. Two hands, full of fervor, from the labyrinth with its twin openings, spring out. For want of a spirit, what instigates the livid, the atrocious, or the blushing dispensator? (47)

The hope of becoming exists, but must face up to a shameful force, the "blushing dispensator." Still, human endeavor continues. "The history of man is a long succession of synonyms for the same vocable. To contradict it is a duty" (45). Poetry, which wounds and is wounded by its poets and readers (21) is surely this contradiction in Char's world. We may not grasp it as it moves on, like the shadow in the orchard that "we should greet" but which "withdraws without plucking" any fruit:

We should greet the shade with her half-closed eyes. She withdraws from the orchard without plucking. (17)

To visit the orchard, to feel its promise, to move on without seizing it: this reticent witnessing is typically dual. One of these aphorisms describes the "creature's rotation" that we live, between the optimism of the act of creation and the pessimism of the creator:

8. Mary Ann Caws, *Presence of René Char*, Princeton University Press, 1976, 5.

The creator is pessimist; the creation, ambitious and therefore, optimist. The creature's rotation conforms to their opposing prescriptions. (9)

This small volume breathes with such "rotation," as the poems alternately offer suffering and hope, martyrdom and the branching out of revolt (69). This is not simply a vacillation between different ideas, but a space of movement and dynamism that comprises a human becoming that can always again be resistance. "The distant inclemency, as seen by a noble gaze, is both flowing and fixed" (77). It is impossible to make shorthand judgment as to either a bleak or hopeful nature of this "brittle age," for we join in Char's gaze upon history here, realizing that all the questions lie open between flow and stasis.

With the title *Returning Upland*, Char refers to the dry lands above the source of a river, such as the unusually large spring in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse from which the Sorgue issues. (See "Marked upon the Chasm" (97), which describes the riverland, as well as Sobin's glossary.) Why return "upland," instead of simply "upstream," to the source itself? (The French word "amont" means both "uphill" and "upstream.") In a 1966 interview, Char said that the "return to the source" was an illusion:

On the contrary, it is necessary to go "above" the spring, to what allows the springs to create themselves: to the place where the nature of being is the most inhospitable and where the first nourishment is found. There comes a moment when we need to make this march to the summit with the viaticum of knowledge and lucidity. And one thinks one has arrived, one sees that, during this long absorbing time, the downhill slope has given itself up to the spring with its waters, flowers, renewal: a sort of reconciliation. [. . .] But everything must begin again, always: reaching the summit is a lure. But it "had to" be done.⁹

The poet seeks being, seeks knowledge through multiple paths. The question continues: that is the reward. Elsewhere, Char has a vagabond character say "Route, es-tu là?"—"Road, are you there?" (OC, 299).

9. René Char, interview with Edith Mora, *Le Monde*, May 28, 1966. Quoted in Marie-Claude Char (editor), *René Char: L'atelier du poète*, Gallimard 1966, 834–36. Translation mine.

Thus the word "among," like the "passage from lure to lure" in the *Bataille* epigraph (89), announces the nature of the volume's search which will take place through the landscapes of mountains, rocks, villages, and rivers of the Luberon and the Vaucluse. The volume opens with "Seven Fragments of Luberon": each stanza seems to meditate through or around another specific part (fruit, youth, a village, "my days," rosemary, the poet's house . . .) of the memories of this "(r)ange of my mournings" (92), this mountain range which has seen his losses. "A key will be my dwelling" (99), for it is in movement through the land that the poet finds and speaks of loss, endurance, and the relationship of past and a possible future.

Echoes of the wartime history that touched Char lie closely layered with thoughts brought on by personal loss and recent illnesses: "Stone after stone, I endure my house's demolition," (93) and "[. . .] I dig in the air my tomb and my return" (107). Recent and more distant historical events meld, and meld in turn with a larger geological movement.

Like nature when it moves forth to remake, after our injuries,
a mountain. (73)

A similar duality underlies "Sentry of the Speechless," where the poet seems to remember the Resistance: "I am bound to the courage of several people; I've lived violently, without aging, my mystery among them." He also evokes a broader, oceanic immensity of human presence at the same time: "I have shuddered at the existence of all others like an incontinent boat about the segmented depths" (117). The political alchemy of Resistance actions mingles with traces of earlier hardships, even ancient ones, whose shadow is still visible in the nature and the human artifacts of the landscape. The poem "Venasque" gives us to understand that the town existed because men gathered against the frosts outside, but even so the village seemed to hang frozen against the world (75). The disappearance of Aerea (105), an ancient town whose site (Sobin tells us) is now disputed, resonates alongside stories of villages like Mérimindol which were raided by the Gestapo: "The sweat of the butchers / Still hypnotizes Mérimindol" (95).¹⁰ The *Vaudois* in "Seven Fragments of Luberon" were heretics who were burned at the stake ("the pyre melted the snow . . ." [93]) in the Luberon region in 1545. Again, the suffering endured in World War II seems to be layered over

an earlier history that is still written in fragments in the land, its rock, and snow. The tombs carved in living rock at the Romanesque church of St-Pantaléon inspired "Precursor": "In a rock I recognized death, fugued and measurable. . . ." This death's rhythm transcends any particular historical moment. The careful reader of Char will come to know these sites where the poet's ideas grew out of his dialogue with place, nature, and things.

One such place, the medieval ruins of Thouzon, provides the visual cue for understanding this dissolution of the historical idea. In "Cherishing Thouzon," the "desire for speech" has receded like ocean waters, and the idea of a "work" is scattered, submerged. And yet this doesn't lead to silence and the utter loss of forms, rather an appreciation of their broken state. A "return" is still possible, the swirling day and snow in this poem for instance, but to be gained by following the "trail of foam and indigent course of broken forms." (I gather from a brief foray on Google that, ironically, these broken forms that inspired Char are being renovated and restored by a volunteer association dedicated to preserving the architectural patrimony.) The eloquence of broken remnants of our human world might counteract the inadequate discourses about history chosen by those who refuse to look into the obscurity: "They push into their ovens, they add into the smooth dough of their bread only a pinch of wheaten despair" ("Mirage of the Needles" 103).¹¹

It is valuable to have these two works together in one volume; this is an excellent new addition to the small number of Char translations in print. Read and reread these poems for the landscapes they make of time, language, and human meaning. Enjoy tracing the distances and coincidences of English and French as they lie side by side on opposite pages. The similarity of the two languages often allows for a

10. Sobin's glossary tells how Mérindol was thrice devastated in history, "by the plague, War of Religions, and by the Nazi occupation" (164). Paul Veyne, who conversed with Char extensively, tells us in *René Char en ses poèmes*: "there is a fatedness over Mérindol, René said, the village was razed in 1540 and, in 1944, it suffered more than any other from German and French Nazis. To these butcheries was added, just after the Liberation, the tragedy of an explosion that had many victims; it was accidental, according to René, and due to the handling of a very unstable explosive; but it was taken for a fascist attack; René was called with others to try and calm the population that wanted to lynch some collaborators who were prisoners." (Gallimard, 1990, 444, trans. mine).

11. For a rich and thought-provoking reading of the complexities of *Retour amont*, see Mary Ann Caws, *The Presence of René Char*, 262–85.

very close or "identical" translation ("The creator is pessimist; the creation, ambitious and therefore, optimist" (9) or: "The history of man is a long succession of synonyms for the same vocable" [45]). At other times, the English words, Germanic or Anglo-Saxon, simply hold their own value equal to the French. In "At the Gateways of Aerea," which evokes the disappearance of a happy, ancient city ("Forced march, with a scattered end. Whipped children, golden thatch, sanious men, all to the wheel!" [105]), the French "chaume doré" and the English "golden thatch" coincide perfectly in meaning yet draw on totally different sounds and associations. Other English words bring a new but welcome directness to things. "This is the boneheap" for "C'est le charnier"; "We will shun the bee and the snake" for "Nous éviterons l'abeille et le serpent": in passages like these, the sharper shapes of English help to emphasize that the poet is drawing a meditated lesson from objects and their raw, quick appearance in the stream of our more abstract thoughts. Thus Giacometti's painting triumphs over the "summed up scraps of death" (125). One further example: while "osselets" and "knuckle-bones" have the same meaning and probably a similar verve in each language, somehow the sounds of *knuckle* go the extra mile and it should make us very happy to have this translation:

O words, too apathetic or so loosely linked. Knuckle-bones,
tumbling into the hand of the decorous trickster, I denounce
you! (37)

Char's hermeticism (which is also a clarity) can intertwine with ambiguities and layers of the language that would challenge any translator. In certain passages, I would prefer a different translation that would better harmonize with Char's ideas: in "Seven Fragments of Luberon," I read "You tire of communion / You shatter with division" for Sobin's "yearn for / shatter from" in the same two lines. The dictionary supports both readings, but Char's valuing of dispersion (one of his titles is *The Word as Archipelago*) and the image in the preceding line of a "lovely, swarmless tree" support the reading that favors division and worries about the resting place of communion (91). I read an enigmatic short piece with its imperatives, instead of the gerund Sobin chose, to see Char calling for an end to the overly enthusiastic or programmatic "breath of work." If the imperatives were kept in the following translation (substitute "Take" for "Taking," "set back" for "setting back," and "let them no longer" for "until they no longer"), it would become clearer that the "boneheap" is the unfortunate dynasty of academicism.

Taking away the breath of work, its inconceivable dynasty,
setting back the liberal arts until they no longer reflect on
anything, this is the boneheap. (51)

In other cases, the dense local meaning of a word simply has no equivalent. The title "Aiguevive" is nicely rendered as "Living Waters" by Sobin, but to do so he had to sacrifice the reference (by opposition) to the town of Aiguesmortes, named for the "dead waters" of the marshes where it is located. The regional word "furolles" ("will-o'-the-wisp") is translated as "jack-o'-lanterns," which term may have originally been exactly equivalent to "will-o'-the-wisp" but has distracting associations now (7-8).

The idea of upland ("amont") is particularly important and complex, and it may be that an elegant translation of

Revers des sources: pays d'amont, pays sans biens, hôte pelé,
je roule ma chance vers vous. (130)

is yet to be found. The complexity of this series of words in French, each so brief, each grammatical linkage so concisely suggested, is not equaled when in English Sobin has to reach to "towards you" for "vers vous", or to "the regions upland" for "pays d'amont". Finally, it is interesting to consider some moments in the appendix of some of Sobin's alternate translations, passages when a more direct word might better capture Char's surprisingly elemental world. There, "Slowness of the Future" has the phrases "before waking in redness on the stone of the bed" and "the candlestick's summer" (161) instead of "awaking—flushed—on the stone of the bed" and "the candelabra's summer" (137).

Read Char today. There is weightedness in Char's language that seems necessary to carry his perception of human time. But there is lift, too. Dominique Fourcade, a poet always concerned with the nature of our contemporary moment, asking "how do I read him today?" says that Char is the last of the tradition, "of the poem centered in the middle of the page, and of the intention of the poem centered in the middle of the text [. . .]." But on the other hand his writing, at times, opens up, "[. . .] the body of the poem is fragmented, [. . .] the smallest themes (or bits of the grand theme) depart the text constantly and come back in two lines later, while others go flying out in their turn [. . .]."¹² A

12. Dominique Fourcade, "Char," in Coron, Antoine, *René Char*, Bibliothèque nationale de France/Gallimard, 2007, 18.

worked, controlled rhetoric is one of Char's resources, but his language has energies that surprise; his images may bring together associations around a center, but a center which pushes elsewhere:

The dart binding two sheets,
Life to life, clamor and mount,
Flashed. (133)

Counterpath Press has made accessible the rich evidence of Gustaf Sobin's connection to René Char, as well as mature poetic meditations written by Char when he was distanced from the events of actuality, as he himself said, but still recognized the cruelties of history with an astonishing clarity aided by poetry. Reading these pages rewards especially if you make it a lifetime reading project. Dozens of Char's shorter wartime notes are lovingly remembered and quoted by a wide readership in France. "An act is virgin, even when repeated." "Our inheritance was left to us by no will." "In action, be primitive; in foresight, a strategist." "Passionate powers, plus rules of action." "At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant but the place is set." "Take part in the leap. Not in its epilogue, the banquet." "Within our darkness, there is not one place for Beauty. The whole place is for Beauty."¹³ Much of that is going on in *The Brittle Age* and *Returning Upland*: "I entered the brittle age," "The flowering hawthorn was my first alphabet," "I revolt, therefore I ramify [. . .]"(69). Clarity and hermeticism: if you read Char enough, you start to confuse those two, as the worked nature of this poetics of thought starts to reveal our actuality as truly consisting of contradictions between winter and love, a poisoned world and human hope, a land of mourning and dynamic creation, stillness and movement. Thus the poem that only revealed itself after several readings and returns, seems to say something absolutely necessary and clear.

13. These are numbered short prose pieces from *Feuillets d'Hypnos*. The translations are from *Hypnos Waking* (Jackson Mathews, translator, with collaboration from William Carlos Williams and others, New York: Random House, 1956, 103, 109, 113, 125, 133, 157, 173).