

René Char, Albert Camus

René Char<sup>1</sup>

One cannot do justice in a few pages to a poet like René Char, but one can at least place him in the right context. Certain works justify our seizing any pretext to testify, even without shades of meaning, to what we owe them. And I am happy that this German edition of my favorite poems gives me the opportunity to say that I consider René Char our greatest living poet, and *Fureur et Mystère* to be the most astonishing book French poetry has given us since Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations* and Apollinaire's *Alcools* ...

The originality of René Char's poetry, actually, is startling. He came to it by way of surrealism, no doubt, but by lending rather than giving himself to that movement, staying just long enough to realize that his step was firmer when he walked alone. Since the publication of *Seuls demeurent*, a handful of poems have been enough to set a free and virgin wind blowing through our poetry. After so many years devoted to the manufacture of "inane trifles," our poets relinquished the lute only to put the bugle to their lips, transforming poetry into a salubrious funeral pyre.

It blazed, like those great bonfires of grass which in the poet's own country give scent to the wind and richness to the earth. At last we could breathe. Natural mysteries, with living waters and sunlight, burst into a room where poetry still lay spellbound in echoes and shadows. I am describing a poetic revolution.

But I would have less admiration for the originality of this poetry if its inspiration were not, at the same time, so ancient. Char rightly lays claim to the tragic optimism of pre Socratic Greece. From Empedocles to Nietzsche a secret has been passed from summit to summit, and after a long eclipse, Char once more takes up this hard and rare tradition. The fires of Etna smoulder beneath some of his unendurable phrases, the royal wind of Sils Maria irrigates his poems and makes them echo with the sound of clear and tumultuous waters.

What Char calls "wisdom with tear-filled eyes" is revived here, at the very height of our disasters. His poetry, at once both old and new, combines refinement with simplicity. It carries day and night in the same impulse. In the intense light beneath which Char was born we know the sun sometimes grows dark. At two in the afternoon, when the countryside is replete with warmth, a dark wind blows over it. In the same way, whenever Char's poetry seems obscure, it is because of his furious concentration of images, a thickening of the light that sets it apart from the abstract transparence we usually look for only because it makes no demands on us.

But at the same time, just as on the sun-filled plains, this black point solidifies vast beaches of fight around itself, light in which faces are stripped bare. At the center of the *Poème pulvérisé*, for example, there is a mysterious hearth around which torrents of warm images inexhaustibly whirl.

This is also why Char's poetry is so completely satisfying. At the heart of the obscurity through which we advance, the fixed, round light of Paul Valéry's skies would be of no use. It would bring nostalgia, not relief. In the strange and rigorous poetry René Char offers us, on the other hand, our very night shines forth in clarity and we learn to walk once more. This poet for all times speaks accurately for our own. He is at the heart of the battle, he formulates our misfortunes as well as our renaissance: "If we live in a lightning flash, it is the heart of the eternal."

Char's poetry does indeed exist in a flash of lightning—and not only in a figurative sense. The man and the artist, who go hand in hand, were tempered yesterday in the struggle against Hitlerian totalitarianism, and today in the denunciation of the rival but allied nihilisms that are tearing our world apart.

Char has accepted sacrifice but not delight in the common struggle. "To leap not in the festival, but in its epilogue." A poet of revolt and liberty, he has never succumbed to complacency, and never, to use his own words, confused revolt with ill temper.

It can never be said enough, and all men confirm it every day, that there are two kinds of revolt—one that conceals a wish for servitude, and another that seeks desperately for a free order, in which, as Char magnificently puts it, bread will be cured. Char knows well that to cure bread means to restore it to its rightful place, to place it above all doctrines, and give it the taste of friendship. This rebel thus escapes from the fate of so many noble insurgents who end up as cops or accomplices. Char will always protest against those who sharpen guillotines. He will have no truck with prison bread, and bread will always taste better to him in a hobo's mouth than in the prosecuting attorney's.

It is easy to understand, then, why this poet of revolutionaries has no trouble being also a poet of love, into which his poems sink fresh and tender roots. A whole aspect of Char's ethic and his art is summed up in the proud phrase of the *Poème pulvérisé*: "Bow down only in order to love." For him, love is a question of bowing down, and the love that runs through his work, however virile, has the stamp of tenderness. This is again why Char, caught up as we all are in the most confusing history, has not been afraid to maintain and celebrate within this history the beauty for which it has given us so desperate a thirst. Beauty surges from his admirable *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, burning like the rebel's blade, red, streaming from a strange baptism, crowned with flames.

We recognize her then for what she is, not some anaemic, academic goddess, but the sweetheart, the mistress, the companion of our days. In the middle of the struggle, here is a poet who dared to shout at us: "In our darkness, there is no one place for beauty. There is space for beauty everywhere." From that moment on, confronting the nihilism of his time and opposing all forms of betrayal, each of René Char's poems has been a milestone on the path to hope.

What more can one ask of a poet in our time? In the midst of our dismantled citadels, by virtue of a generous and secret art, are woman, peace, and liberty hard to maintain. And far from diverting us from the fray, we learn that these rediscovered riches are the only ones worth fighting for. Without having meant to, and simply because he has rejected nothing of his time, Char does more than express what we are: he is also the poet of our tomorrows.

Although he remains alone, he brings us together, and the admiration he arouses mingles with that great fraternal warmth within which men bear their best fruit. We can be sure of it; it is in works like his from now on that we will seek recourse and vision. Char's poems are messengers of truth, of that lost truth each day now brings us closer to, although for a long time we were able only to say that it was our country and that far away from it we suffered, as if in exile.

But words finally take shape, light dawns, one day the country will receive its name. Today a poet describes it for us, magnificently, reminding us, already, to justify the present, that this country is "earth and murmurs, amid the impersonal stars."

Preface to the German edition of René Char's *Poésies*, written in 1958 and published in 1959

1 René Char, a close personal friend of Camus, was born in Provence in 1907. He was initially associated with the surrealist movement, but broke with it in 1937. During World War II he fought as a member of the Resistance. References to his experiences, which also inspired his book *Feuillets d'Hypnos* in 1946, can be found in *Carnets II*, pp. 216-17; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 170. —P.T.

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