

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 47
Issue 1 *Centering Black Cultural Production in
Translation*

Article 17

2023

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Recommended Citation

Pap, Jennifer (2023) "Sensing a Way Out of René Char's "Historian's Hovel"," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, Article 17. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2198>

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Sensing a Way Out of René Char's "Historian's Hovel"

Abstract

René Char, like many other twentieth-century writers, faced the dilemma of how to write adequately about historical atrocity, and key moments in his writing about violence display this. In the context of post-World War I disillusionment, rising Fascism, and post-World War II calculations of those who vied for power, he also criticized bad faith iterations of History. However, a number of texts in his *Feuillets d'Hypnos* ('*Leaves of Hypnos*,') published in 1946 and written during his participation in the Resistance, assert an alternative history in which aesthetic, ethical, and political experience were linked. With the post-war return to the usual order of political institutions, the practice of this alternative history ended, as Char had predicted. It has its afterlife in his writing, however, which posits the continued creation of a shared, common aesthetic experience. Jacques Rancière's "dissensus" can helpfully illuminate this, in that it designates multiple moments when people make themselves seen or heard against the expectations of the societally controlling "distribution of the sensible."

Keywords

René Char, French Resistance, fascism, poetry, ethics, appearance, imagination, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, dissensus, Davide Panagia, sensation, childhood

Sensing a Way Out of René Char's "Historian's Hovel"

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The dilemma of how to write adequately in response to historical atrocity was felt by many writers of the twentieth century. World War I, the first "total" war, had turned new technologies—the so-called "progress" of modern societies—against entire populations. Walter Benjamin, looking back on this war in 1936, wrote that a generation was made "not richer, but poorer in communicable experience" by the forces of destruction on the battlefield for which they were unprepared.¹ Thus he makes the link between the world-changing violence of this new war and the inadequacy of human speech. Francis Ponge, a poet well known for his striving to found a new rhetoric that would make his language adequate for the reality he described, asked in a poem written for a friend killed by the firing squad in World War II: "FACE À UN TEL SUJET QUE PUIS-JE?" (Ponge 37) 'FACED WITH SUCH A SUBJECT WHAT CAN I DO?'² Like Benjamin, Ponge, and many others, René Char struggled to reflect the brutality of twentieth-century history adequately in his writing. This can be seen, for example, in his references to the poet's or the written text's disappearance. "Le poète est retourné pour de longues années dans le néant du père. Ne l'appellez pas, vous tous qui l'aimez."³ 'The poet has returned for a long span of years into the naught of the father. Do not call him, all you who love him,' he writes in 1942, and in the preface to *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (*Leaves of Hypnos*), his book of wartime notes, he insists that he, the author, could have been erased: "Ce carnet pourrait n'avoir appartenu à personne" 'This notebook could have belonged to no one'; and the book itself could have been destroyed by fire: "Un feu d'herbes sèches eût tout aussi bien été leur éditeur" (Oc 173) 'A brushfire might just as well have been their editor.'

Char displays the difficulty of responding to violence—this time to the brutal deaths of children—in his first direct written response to a specific act of

¹ "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? . . . A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 84).

² Translations of all French quotations are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ "Chant de refus: début du partisan" 'Refusal Song: Beginning of the Partisan' (*Oeuvres complètes* ('*Complete Works*') 146). The date is provided in Marie-Claire Char, 342. Citations of Char's work are from *Oeuvres complètes* and will be indicated in the text with the abbreviation Oc.

atrocities. In 1937, with Franco in power and bombings of civilians routing Spain, he prefaced his poetic volume *Placard pour un chemin d'écoliers* ('Signpost for a schoolchild's path') with a dedication addressed to the children of Spain.⁴ The poet turns his own and the reader's gaze upon the blood of the harmed bodies in the opening lines and in the later description of bodies piling up in the common grave: "La fosse commune a été rajeunie" (Oc 89) 'The common grave has been made younger.' There are also exclamations of rage and judgement: "Incomparables bouchers! Honte! Honte! Honte!" 'Incomparable butchers! Shame! Shame! Shame!'⁵ Char later stated that these murderous events exceeded what could be written, saying that what he wrote was a response to "l'exigence d'une marche forcée dans l'indicible" (Oc 85) 'the requirement of a forced march into the unspeakable.' The opening sentence, broken up by dashes, loud punctuation, and explicit vocabulary describing the horrors, also displays the difficulty, as if no words could be enough.⁶ A vocabulary of despair accumulates (no doubt appropriately), overloading the text. In the most direct sign of the poet's doubt about the adequacy of his language, the text closes with a plea that the children pardon him: "Enfants d'Espagne, j'ai formé ce PLACARD alors que les yeux matinaux de certains d'entre vous n'avaient encore rien appris des usages de la mort qui se coulait en eux. Pardon de vous le dédier" (89) 'Children of Spain, I made this SIGNPOST when the morning eyes of some of you had not yet learned anything of the practices of death that were flowing into them. Pardon me for dedicating them to you.' The poet has to excuse his writing whose validity pertains more to the world before "the practices of death" appeared in the children's lives.

Char carries these questions to an intense level of self-critique in "Le Bouge de l'historien" ('The Historian's Hovel').⁷ The title discredits historians, as does the

⁴ The "Dedication" was written in March; in April, Nazi planes invited by Franco would bomb Guernica on a market day in an unprecedented attack, ensuring the deaths of the elderly, women, and children.

⁵ Concerning the exclamations of rage and judgment, Michel points out that with this heightened tone, the poet summons his implied readers to recognition of their own ethical and political responsibilities, and implies a possible collective, a "we" that might influence history (74).

⁶ Here are the first lines: "Enfants d'Espagne, - ROUGES, oh combien, à embuer pour toujours l'acier qui vous déchiquette; - À Vous" (Oc 89) 'Children of Spain - oh so RED, clouding forever more the steel that tears you apart; - To You.' Scott Shinaberger connects such moments to a sort of failure of language, claiming that when "the poetic voice [...] erupts in condemnation" it amounts to a "production of excess within the writing process itself" (81-82). He points out (while analyzing texts from *Dehors la nuit est gouverné* ('Outside the night is governed')) that this language of excess may be "of limited use" to the poet because it is "in contrast to the tendency toward progress valorized in the poet's work" (88).

⁷ "Le Bouge de l'historien" was written in 1942 in the midst of his Resistance activities, according to Veyne (198), who notes the manuscript date of November 11th, 1942, the day of Nazi annexation of the south, which had been until then termed the "Zone libre" 'Free Zone.'

opening image of the “pyramide de martyrs” ‘pyramid of martyrs’ which casts history as the heaped evidence of massacre, thus denouncing any pyramid that might pretend to be a glorious monument to events (Oc 145). Then, the poet actually seems to place himself in the “hovel” of the title along with the other discredited historians.⁸ He is guilty of neglecting the engagement he owed to his writing: “Onze hivers tu auras renoncé au quantième de l’espérance, à la respiration de ton fer rouge, en d’atroces performances psychiques” (Oc 145) ‘For eleven winters you will have renounced the rendez-vous of hope, the respiration of your red-hot iron, in terrible psychic performances’ (trans Lawler 35, note 84). The breath at the core of the poet’s being is figured as a hot iron ready to find form at the smith’s anvil, but “performances” distracted him from that true process of forging something solid.⁹ With violent self-recrimination, he condemns the “page” he had used to turn away from the monstrous realities that should have held his attention: “Interdiction de croire tienne cette page d’où tu prenais élan pour te soustraire à la géante torpeur d’épine du Monstre, à son contentieux de massacreurs. Miroir de la murène! Miroir du vomito!” ‘You must not believe it yours, that page that powered your flight from the giant torpor of the Monster’s thorn, its wrangling butchers. Mirror moray eel! Mirror of yellow fever!’ The page itself becomes an accusing mirror, reflecting back to him a dangerous moray eel and yellow fever. Thus his own writing is cast as having been complicit with monstrous abjection and illness. The guilt of the hovel pertains to him: he has failed to find a writing that would engage with the century of butchers and monsters.

However, the poem’s last line promises a future contentment offered by an ethical world. “Dure, afin de mieux aimer un jour ce que tes mains d’autrefois n’avaient fait qu’effleurer sous l’olivier trop jeune” (Oc 145) ‘Endure, so as one day to love even more what your former hands barely touched under the too-young olive tree.’ The world contains ethical potential in that something waits there that can be loved. Sensation, here only the briefest touch of the fingertips, has been the means to discover that goodness. The poet must “endure,” that is, give time for what was felt there to come into existence, to become. Thus, poetry has a particular

⁸ See Laure Michel, 80-82, for an excellent reading of “Le Bouge de l’historien.” My reading of the poem has some points in common with hers, and she in particular discusses the pyramid image and argues that in this poem history is both the carnage, rejected by the poet, and the possible future affirmed in the last line.

⁹ Belin suggests that the reference to the guilt of eleven winters could indicate “l’atmosphère carnassière du *Marteau sans maître* et de *Dehors la nuit est gouvernée*” (480) ‘the carnivorous atmosphere of *Hammer With No Master* and *Outside the Night is Governed*,’ earlier works marked by use of pessimism and use of violence as fantasy, whereas the Char of “Le Bouge de l’historien” renounces a complacency about violence that was part of surrealism. Belin’s work *René Char et le surréalisme* shows the poet’s relationship to the movement as a “pole” that continues to exert its presence in Char’s work to different degrees and in different ways.

connection with an ethical world and a sense of touch that can be historically regenerative and even political.¹⁰

The “Dedication” discussed above, like “Le Bouge de l'historien,” hints at the possibilities of childhood as well. The violence that dominates the text has destroyed a childhood world where possibility had still been present: war was waged at a distance and the child’s world was made up of “notre prairie, notre grenier, nos huttes” (Oc 89) ‘our prairie, our hayloft, our huts.’ The dedication remembers this world that belonged to the children, and with the possessive adjective “our,” the poet includes himself and his own childhood in the memory of this time before. They were supported by adults whose job was “entretenir les rouages de l’arc-en-ciel” (Oc 89) ‘maintaining the gears of the rainbow.’ This text doesn’t activate a nostalgic view of childhood innocence, but defines a childhood world of shared sensations such as the rainbow and the fields. It is also a world free of a straight and logically defined path, for the “signpost” evoked in the title of the volume marks a “schoolchild’s path,” a path improvised when children skip school and set out into the bushes to chase their own adventures far from the organized world of adults. On that path and in their world, they moved through and responded to spaces of aesthetic experience. As Laure Michel suggests, childhood here represents resistance and freedom from a traditional world: “Enfin, parce qu’elle est force d’invention, l’enfance est, dans l’oeuvre de Char, réserve de révolte” (79) ‘Because it is a force of invention, childhood in Char’s work is a source of revolt.’ She also reads Char’s writing of childhood as the very opposite of nostalgic; rather, it holds present relevance: “[L’enfance] n’est pas un état repoussé dans le passé, qui vaudrait par son existence attestée et perdue, mais elle la différence à partir de laquelle il est possible de penser l’histoire” (75-76) ‘[Childhood] is not a state set back in the past, valued by its witnessed and lost condition, it is rather the difference starting from which one can conceive of a history.’¹¹

¹⁰ Mathieu has written on moments when Char’s language alludes at once to poetry’s failure or disappearance, and to its continuing presence and “illocutory force” (139-40). This reading, traced through numerous examples, is one of many in his book that sensitively reveal the complex intertwining of Char’s poetics and ethical commitment to engagement with historical realities. Van Kelly gracefully summons numerous texts from Char’s *Seuls demeurent* ‘They Alone Remain’ to demonstrate the balance of historical and poetic commitment in Char’s writing. On “Le Bouge de l'historien,” for example, he writes: “[t]he scope of the poem embraces the conflict and the haven; indeed the overall tenor of *Seuls demeurent* suggests that love and beauty will thrive once more, despite the temporary estrangements of history.” Kelly’s reading joins the poetic and the ethical, as when he states: “Char thought out his confrontation with the events of WWII by means of this dialogic construction of poetical and historical sublims, the idyll and the polemic” (“Passages Beyond” 116, 119).

¹¹ Michel’s reading, at once detailed and wide-ranging, also interprets the “Dédicace” as a new writing of history for Char in that it displays the “irruption” ‘sudden intrusion’ of history into his poetic world, and calls for the ethical and political engagement of the written text and its reader in that history (69-77).

Poetically, references to the possibilities of childhood and its related values will continue through Char's wartime texts, and not merely as a separate space of solace or nostalgia for innocence; rather, they will be intertwined with questions of Resistance action. Amidst language weighted down by awareness of excessive violence, Char also finds ways to reflect the writing scrawled by a child on a "signpost" to mark an impromptu path.¹² Ethical and political meaning emerge from signaling the world of childhood and the sensory and imaginative connections that are part of it. In other words, although Char has put the poetic voice on trial for being stuck in the "historian's hovel," there may also be ways that his writing can create an alternate history.

Resistance: The Senses, Imagination, and Language

Char was mobilized in the French army during the Phoney War (1939-40), and after the Defeat in June 1940, was able to make his way back to his native Isle-sur-Sorgue in the South of France. Warned that the Vichy police were observing him (because of his political leanings), he retreated to the more remote village of Céreste, in the hills of the Luberon. Based there, he spent many months recruiting and developing a resistance network, and eventually headed an SAP unit (Section Atterrissage-Parachutage 'Landing-Parachuting Section') that oversaw clandestine landings of arms and resisters.¹³ He was a witness to and participant in violent actions, and he records many of them in *Feuillets d'Hypnos*.¹⁴ However, these "devoirs infernaux" (Text 106 Oc 200) 'hellish duties,' as he calls them, share space with observations of nature, and the voices and comradeship of the Resistance fighters and others around him. The shared aesthetic experience of his Resistance group, as expressed in these notes, allows Char to present his own "history," one that goes against the grain of world violence and the bad faith narratives that are the object of his rage in "Le Bouge de l'historien." Char called the Resistance a "treasure" (Text 195 Oc 222), clearly because of the quality of common life and politically meaningful concerted action he shared with his group. Details such as insects heard or seen, birdsong, casual words spoken, or the quality of a handshake

¹² Bertrand Marchal has detailed moments of Char's writing when, alongside declarations of the necessity of ethical action, an image of the poet creating an opening or indicating the possibility of movement occurs ("L'action et le verbe" 26).

¹³ The "Chronologie" of Char's *Oeuvres complètes* establishes these dates (Oc LXXI-LXXIV). Among the many other useful sources on Char's Resistance activity I would particularly note Greilsamer (137-224), the *Cahier de l'Herne* edited by Fourcade, which includes testimonials about Char made by his Resistance comrades (191-209), and Coron's catalogue for the 2007 exhibit on Char at the Bibliothèque Nationale, which contains documents and letters related to this activity.

¹⁴ Char wrote short prose texts in a small notebook that he carried with him. He revised them after the war and published them in Camus' "Collection Espoir" as *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (1946, Gallimard).

are all evidence of sense perceptions that accompany the experience of resistance.¹⁵ It is as if some moments of *Feuillets d'Hypnos* enacted the hope of aesthetic plenitude expressed at the end of “Le Bouge de l'historien.”

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt gives Char's actions a political stamp when she states that he and other Resistance fighters were some of the rare individuals in modern history to occupy a truly political space—a “public realm”—because of the “vacuum” left when the Third Republic capitulated. The Resisters were the ones who were left to make decisions and act.¹⁶ The “treasure” of the Resistance, she writes (quoting Char's term from Text 195), meant that those who were part of it had “become ‘challengers,’ had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear. ‘At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set’” (“Preface” 4). Char's image of the seat at the table left open for “freedom” (Text 131, Oc 206) gives poetic immediacy to Arendt's concept of “appearance” as the necessary condition for freedom: “It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (*The Human Condition* 198-99). In turn, her use of Char's experience and quoted works to illustrate a rare moment of freedom helps us see the political heft of the poet's wartime works. Also hinted at here is Arendt's insistence that freedom and the political only appear in a public realm, and thus the fact that she will see Char's moment as ending. More on this later.¹⁷

Arendt's reading of “appearance” in a number of Char's texts in *Feuillets d'Hypnos* also suggests a connection of the sensorial and the political world. She quotes, for instance, the text about Archduke (a code name) whose encounters with others in the Resistance have made an alchemical change in his character: Archduke

¹⁵ See Texts 73, 33, 89, and 17 (Oc 192, 183, 197, and 179).

¹⁶ “The collapse of France [. . .] had emptied, from one day to the next, the political scene of their country, leaving it to the puppet-like antics of knaves or fools, and they who as a matter of course had never participated in the official business of the Third Republic were sucked into politics with the force of a vacuum. Thus, without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations, they had come to constitute willy-nilly a public realm where—without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe—all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word” (Arendt, “Preface” 3).

¹⁷ Arendt uses the analogy of performing arts to show that politics cannot be complete but is made of continuing actions: “The performing arts, on the contrary, have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work,’ and both depend upon others for the performance itself” (Arendt, “What is Freedom?” 153-54).

now “goes naked,” as if his new commitment brought him closer to sensing the world around him (Text 30, *Oc* 182).

Yes, aesthetic feeling and political life can be in concert: Char’s description of an artwork says this explicitly (Text 178). Char describes the reproduction of a 17th-century painting that was seen by all the Resisters who entered the room in the village of Céreste where he centered his Resistance activity.¹⁸ A mere reproduction pinned up on the wall, it nevertheless touched everyone deeply (their eyes were “burned” and their thirst was quenched). The text explicitly describes the composition, but only after introducing it by mentioning the responses of all these spectators who are also actors in history—in the Resistance.

La reproduction en couleur du *Prisonnier* de Georges de la Tour que j’ai piquée sur le mur de chaux de la pièce où je travaille, semble, avec le temps, réfléchir son sens dans notre condition. Elle serre le coeur mais combien désaltère! Depuis deux ans, pas un réfractaire qui n’ait, passant la porte, brûlé ses yeux aux preuves de cette chandelle. La femme explique, l’emmuré écoute. Les mots qui tombent de cette terrestre silhouette d’ange rouge sont des mots essentiels, des mots qui portent immédiatement secours. Au fond du cachot, les minutes de suif de la clarté tirent et diluent les traits de l’homme assis. Sa maigreur d’ortie sèche, je ne vois pas un souvenir pour la faire frissonner. L’écuelle est une ruine. Mais la robe gonflée emplit soudain tout le cachot. Le Verbe de la femme donne naissance à l’inespéré mieux que n’importe quelle aurore.

Reconnaissance à Georges de La Tour qui maîtrisa les ténèbres hitlériennes avec un dialogue d’êtres humains. (*Oc* 218)

This color print of “The Prisoner” by Georges de la Tour, which I have pinned on the whitewashed wall in the room where I work, seems with time to reflect its meaning on our situation. It chokes the heart, but how it quenches thirst! For two years, not one partisan has come through that door without his eyes being burnt by the meaning of this candle. The woman is explaining, the prisoner listening. The words falling from this terrestrial silhouette of a red angel are essential words, they help at once. Deep in the dungeon, the tallow minutes of light trace and dissolve the features of the sitting man. Skinny as a dry nettle, he has no memory to shake him. The bowl is a ruin. But the swollen gown suddenly fills the whole dungeon. The [W]ord of [the] woman gives birth to the unhoped-for, better than any dawn.

¹⁸ The painting reproduced, which Char calls *The Prisoner*, by 17th century painter Georges de la Tour, is now recognized as *The Wife of Job*.

Gratitude to Georges de la Tour, who overpowered the Hitlerian night with a dialogue between human beings.¹⁹

This ekphrastic passage details the visual power of the composition that so fills and fulfills the spectators: light, color, the contrasting volumes of the emaciated man and the fullness of the woman's red dress. That is all in aid of the assertion of human dialogue in the concluding, one-sentence paragraph, be it the dialogue represented in de la Tour's image or the dialogue that art enables in the spectators: here, the Resistance fighters in the room in Céreste. The term "Verbe" 'Word,' with its Biblical resonances, elevates what may be simple everyday language (in the painting or in Céreste). This shared aesthetic experience is immersed in the political importance of the moment. The tradition of ekphrastic writing seems to shift here, as the lovingly described image has a situational purpose that is explicitly political. The "treasure" of the Resistance is a blending of the senses with political engagement.

A similar moment of sensory immersion occurs in a description of a group of Resistance members awaiting an unspecified action. The focus is not on the act to come but on the sensations, gestures, sights, and sounds that surround them, linking them together and to the landscape around them.

La contre-terreur c'est ce vallon que peu à peu le brouillard comble, c'est le fugace bruissement des feuilles comme un essaim de fusées engourdies, c'est cette pesanteur bien répartie, c'est cette circulation ouatée d'animaux et d'insectes tirant mille traits sur l'écorce tendre de la nuit, c'est cette graine de luzerne sur la fossette d'un visage caressé, c'est cet incendie de la lune qui ne sera jamais un incendie, c'est un lendemain minuscule dont les intentions nous sont inconnues, c'est un buste aux couleurs vives qui s'est plié en souriant, c'est l'ombre, à quelques pas, d'un bref compagnon accroupi qui pense que le cuir de sa ceinture va céder. . . Qu'important alors l'heure et le lieu où le diable nous a fixé rendez-vous! (Text 141 Oc 209)

The counter-terror is this valley little by little brimmed with mist, it is the fleeting buzz of the leaves like a swarm of torpid Roman candles, it is this heaviness dispersed, this muffled movement of animals and insects etching a thousand marks into the tender bark of the night, it is this grain of alfalfa in the dimple of a face caressed, this fire on the moon which will never catch fire, it is a minuscule day-after whose intentions are unknown to us, it is the

¹⁹ In this translation by Jackson Mathews (*Hypnos Waking* 151) I have made small modifications: I capitalized "Word" to convey the religious connotation of the French word "verbe", and for "la femme," I chose to use "the woman" instead of the more essentialist-sounding "woman" chosen by Mathews—both are linguistically correct translations.

brightly-colored bust that bowed smiling, it is the shadow a few feet away of a brief companion who bends over, worrying that the leather of his belt is going to give. . . Of what importance then the hour and the place the Devil has fixed for our rendez-vous! (*Furor and Mystery* 181)

The passage insists on an equivalence: the counter-terror is made up by the sensed details of the moment and the place. These details might be the mist, a seed, a belt, the color of someone's clothes. The nine-times repeated phrase, "c'est" 'it is,' makes the equivalence clear. Again, sensation blends with and even grounds ethical commitment. In fact, although the "rendez-vous" mentioned at the end alludes to the strategic and concrete action that the group intends, it matters less than the group's unified presence: "Of what importance then the hour and the place the Devil has fixed for our rendez-vous!" Political meaning resides in the shared world that is seen, heard, and felt by all together.²⁰ Reflecting this common feeling, the speaker doesn't organize the scene from a central position but describes a blurry space traversed by impressions of his companions and draw by multiple movements: there is mist, the "thousand marks" made by insects, colors, a shadow. Speaking as "nous" 'we' rather than "je" 'I,' he presents himself not as the leader but as one seen (he sees a form that bends down smiling—the smile indicates that another is looking at and responding to him).²¹ Whereas the poet of "Le Bouge de l'historien" was alone with his sense of failure, here the speaker is positioned in history with others and in a reciprocal flow of exchange with others and the world.

The speaker so positioned recalls the sense of the world defined by Merleau-Ponty as part of a philosophy of mind being immersed in the body and the world rather than above the world in Cartesian duality. In "Eye and Mind," he writes of space that it is "compté à partir de moi comme point ou degré zéro de la spatialité. Je ne le vois pas selon son enveloppe extérieure, je le vis du dedans, j'y suis englobé. Après tout, le monde est autour de moi, non devant moi" (*L'oeil et l'esprit* 59) 'reckoned starting from me as the zero point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live in it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me' ("Eye and Mind" 178).

Going further, sensory experience and shared action intertwine with language in a joke made by "Léon" (the code name for Pierre Zyngerman, Char's

²⁰ See Mathieu (258-60) for an important discussion of passages in which Char's poetic thematics of sensation amounts to an affirmation of moral understanding. He quotes Text 8 of *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, for instance, which describes the failings of "reasonable people" who lose their bearings under the influence of "property": "Ils deviennent hostiles aux frissons de l'atmosphère et se soumettent sans retenue aux instances du mensonge et du mal" 'They become hostile to every quiver of air, and submit without restraint to the solicitations of lying and evil (*Hypnos Waking* 91).

²¹ Laure Michel has written extensively on the passage from "je" to "nous" in Char's writing (67-99).

close associate). He is described tensely awaiting the nighttime arrival of a plane and its parachutist: “‘L’école des poètes du tympan,’ chuchote Léon qui a toujours le mot de la situation” (Text 148 Oc 211) “‘The eardrum school of poets,’ whispers Leon, who always has a phrase for the situation” (*Hypnos Waking* 141). Léon is being clever, but also draws attention to the connection between hearing and action. The sensitive eardrum membrane will allow him to detect the engine sound that would signal the critical moment of action. If there really were an “eardrum poetics,” the poetry it produced would originate with the meeting of self and world, where the world’s sounds cross that thin membrane and invite the subject into dialogue and shared experience. Léon has found the perfect “phrase for the situation” because he has noticed that historically crucial actions are in continuity with the aesthetic experience of the surrounding world.

Connecting individuals to their world seems to nourish imagination as well, as in this text when the speaker reminds himself to choose the right people to bring into the Resistance, making them into partisans by lighting up their imagination with sunlight, as if the sun’s warmth were nourishing a plant: “Ensoleiller l’imagination de ceux qui bégaièrent au lieu de parler, qui rougissent à l’instant d’affirmer. Ce sont de fermes partisans” (Text 60, Oc 189) ‘Befriend the imagination of those who stammer when they would speak, who blush when they have spoken. They are staunch partisans’ (*Hypnos Waking* 109).²² The stammering and blushing of these individuals, potential partisans, verifies the frankness of their speech. Char calls on imagination as the crucial place at which to meet them and encourage them.

Imagination is essential to Char’s alternate history. One of the first notes of *Feuillets d’Hypnos* calls out to it, as if it were one of the crucial tools for wartime Resistance. “Imagination, mon enfant” (Text 3, Oc 175) ‘Imagination, my child,’ says the narrator—reminding himself and others around him, or any reader, to value the openness and fresh vision of childhood that we still hold within. Imagination defines a community in this passage:

J’aime ces êtres tellement épris de ce que leur cœur imagine la liberté qu’ils s’immolent pour éviter au peu de liberté de mourir. Merveilleux mérite du peuple. (Le libre arbitre n’existerait pas. L’être se définirait par rapport à ses cellules, à son hérédité, à la course brève ou prolongée de son destin. . . Cependant il existe entre *tout cela* et l’Homme une enclave d’inattendus et de métamorphoses dont il faut défendre l’accès et assurer le maintien.) (Text 155 Oc 212-13)

²² “Befriend” is Mathews’s translation of “ensoleiller”. A literal translation would be to “shine sunlight upon”.

I love those so much enamoured of what their hearts imagine freedom to be, that they sacrifice themselves to keep the little freedom there is from dying. Wonderful, the virtue of the people!²³ (Free will may not exist. Maybe man is to be defined in terms of his cells, his heredity, the brief or prolonged course of his destiny . . . Yet, between *all that* and Man there is an enclave of metamorphoses and unpredictables; its entrance must be guarded, it must be maintained.)” (*Hypnos Waking* 143)

Against the prison of determinism, Char observes an exceptional space apart (“une enclave”) that makes space for what is unexpected and for change (“d’inattendus et de metamorphoses”).

As if carrying out his own advice about attending to honest speech, Char quotes many of the poetic or mysterious phrases spoken by individuals around him. He makes a place for the language of the group in his own writing. These spoken words bring the sensed world into his writing. “(L)e service énigmatique” ‘the enigmatic service’ is the name one person gives to his own weather predictions. The “catimini” ‘the stealthies’ is the funny nickname another uses to refer to the Resistance group. “Félix” calls a little snake “l’orvet du deuil” ‘the slow worm of grief’ (Texts 67, 47, 94, *Oc* 191, 186, 198) (*Hypnos Waking* 111, 105, 121). These comments are the linguistic evidence of individuals acting together with a sense of wonder. They do not have any useful operational, political meaning, yet they seem to be part of the shared imagination that makes their actions possible.²⁴

Char validates this language when he recounts the visit of a uniformed officer from the more conventionally organized Free French Forces formed by General de Gaulle and functioning from colonial bases outside of Metropolitan France.²⁵ The language of Char’s group is out of reach of such outsiders representing officialdom:

²³ Mathews’s translation, modified by me to read “the people” instead of “the common people”.

²⁴ Carrie Noland has seen the power of multiplicity in these quoted voices: “The *Feuillets d’Hypnos* are far from impersonal, rather they are the personal multiplied [. . .] Thus, the notebook represents a collectivity of singular perspectives, a polyphony of voices that remain distinguished, through proper names and diacritical marks, from one another. Whether the fragments of voices are mere inventions or whether they are actual transcriptions of the utterances of fellow resisters is less important than the gesture of quotation itself. For such a gesture suggests rhetorically a model of nonconformity in which collective action and individual vision might comfortably coexist” (Noland 570).

²⁵ See Veyne 207-08 or Greilsamer 207 on the differences (political, practical, and cultural) between the internal French Resistance groups and de Gaulle’s forces, and on Char’s hatred for de Gaulle. See Van Kelly “Mythes contrastés” for an especially deep analysis of the ways that the internal and external Resistance differed, as well as for his study of myth-making on both sides.

Un officier, venu d'Afrique du Nord, s'étonne que mes "bougres de maquisards," comme il les appelle, s'expriment dans une langue dont le sens lui échappe, son oreille étant rebelle "au parler des images." Je lui fait remarquer que l'argot n'est que pittoresque alors que la langue qui est ici en usage est due à l'émerveillement communiqué par les êtres et les choses dans l'intimité desquels nous vivons continuellement. (Text 61 Oc 190)

An officer who has come up from North Africa is surprised that these "guys²⁶ in the maquis," as he calls us, speak a language he doesn't understand, his ear being hardened against "images in speech." I have reminded him that slang is merely picturesque, whereas the language in use here comes from the sense of wonder communicated by the beings and things we live with in continued intimacy. (*Hypnos Waking* 109)

The "parler des images" 'images in speech,' escaping the comprehension of the more conventional officer, perfectly captures the authentic shared action of the Resistance, enabled or at least bolstered by the group's awareness of the world it inhabits together and the meaning of this world which Char terms "LA-FRANCE-DES-CAVERNES" (Text 123, Oc 204) 'FRANCE OF THE CAVERNS.' Van Kelly has analyzed the mythologizing of the Resistance, on the part of Char and de Gaulle, each in opposing ways. In that light, this claim that his group's local language eludes the officer may be part of Char's myth-building.²⁷ Nevertheless, it speaks to his understanding that imagination and wonder have their place in the world of meaningful political action. Char had written of Léon's phrase (the poetics of the eardrum) that Léon always had the right phrase for the situation, and this means more than the skill of having a way with words in the moment—it reflects the alternate history made possible by the group's sharing of world-awareness.

Post-war Disappointments

This alternate history would not continue in the public scene after the Resistance. Char had predicted that he and other resisters would lose something

²⁶ Mathews's translation modified by me to read "guys" instead of "buggers" so as to avoid homophobic overtones.

²⁷ Kelly writes: "René Char adopte sciemment le registre mythique pour décrire sa propre résistance [...]: le dieu Hypnos veille la nuit sur les maquisards que le poète dirige dans les Basses-Alpes." ("Mythes contrastés" 41) 'René Char knowingly adopts a mythical tone to describe his own resistance [...] the god Hypnos keeps watch at night over the resisters that the poet directs in the Basses-Alpes region.'

after the war: “je devrai rompre avec l’arôme de ces années essentielles, rejeter (non refouler) silencieusement loin de moi mon trésor” (Text 195 Oc 222) ‘I shall have to break with the aroma of these essential years, silently throw away (not repress) my treasure.’ Char was, of course, right: in the post-war period, public political realities would not make space for the shared field of sensation, meaning, language, and action that he had chronicled in his Resistance-era writing. Many in the Internal Resistance had hoped to be able to influence political life after the Liberation of France. There were some instances of such influence.²⁸ But overall, France marched towards a restored political order with the usual figures in power, in what Olivier Wieviorka terms an “incomplete victory.” Char wrote of these disappointments in a rich language of outrage, as he had in the fascist years in “Le Bouge de l'historien.” Actions, as he described them in the 1948 letter to François Currel, were now corrupt:

Les stratèges sont la plaie de ce monde et sa mauvaise haleine. Ils ont besoin, pour prévoir, agir et corriger, d’un arsenal qui, aligné, fasse plusieurs fois le tour de la terre. . . Ils désignent du nom de science de l’Histoire la conscience faussée qui leur fait décimer une forêt heureuse pour installer un bagne subtil, projeter les ténèbres de leur chaos comme lumière de la Connaissance. (“Billets à Francis Currel: IV,” Oc 637)

Strategists are the wound and the bad breath of this world. In order to prepare, act, and punish, they need an arsenal of weapons that would circle the earth several times if they were lined up end to end. . . . They use the term science of History to dignify their false consciousness which makes them decimate a happy forest in order to build a discrete prison, or project the darkness of their chaos as if it were the light of Knowledge.

The strategists using weaponry to “circle the earth” echo the pyramid of martyrs that “obsesses the earth” in “Le Bouge de l'historien.” The controlling violence of a false “History” covers the entire planet.²⁹

²⁸ For example, elections in 1945 replaced the Assembly with a new, less conservative legislative body, in which most of the constituents were holding seats for the first time, and there was a shift to the left (Wieviorka 440-41). Universal suffrage was enacted, giving women the vote. However, as the provisional government (in place from 1944-46) set up new structures for France, there were missed opportunities for positive political change. See Wieviorka’s chapter “Incomplete Victory” for a discussion of resistance hopes for new political possibilities dashed in the post-war period.

²⁹ Laure Michel has spoken of Char’s post-war work as a “crise de l’histoire” ‘crisis of history’ during which he doesn’t show faith in possible human agency as in earlier work (165-178). Michel also points out that after the war, “Le terme d’Histoire apparaît alors fréquemment, toujours accompagné d’une majuscule désignant son emprunt aux discours marxistes de l’époque” (158) ‘the

Char concerned himself with the corruption of words on the local level when, in the chaos of accusations and calls for punishment that followed the Liberation, accusations of theft were leveled against members of his own resistance group in the regional Communist newspaper. This was the “Affaire Céreste” ‘Céreste Affair.’ Char acted to contradict this and the resulting rumors, making public statements attesting to the honesty of his maquis group.³⁰ At the national level, important trials of collaborators such as Robert Brasillach revealed, for many, the moral incoherence of ideas about justice and reprisals. Brasillach’s and many other trials were carried out by the Provisional Government, but vigilantism and the violence of the “épuration sauvage” ‘extra-legal purge’ brought its own version of these moral dilemmas and mistakes.³¹

Char’s 1948 poem-dialogue “Huis de la mort salulaire: *L’interrogoire total*” (‘Death’s Saving Door: *Total Interrogation*,’ Oc 639-40) demonstrates the lethal force of lies and the creation of a false history. A haranguing interrogator tries to coerce a confession of treason from a saddler who appears to be innocent, for he says he was always alone in his workshop:

-Tu étais nuisible et tu étais traître.

-Dans mon atelier, j’étais seul, vous dis-je;
Je piquais le cuir, je l’adoucissais.

- Coupable ou suspect tu seras celui
Dont l’Histoire dit: “Tel il s’est voulu.
Serais-je assez folle pour approfondir?”
[. . .]
Tu contribueras à notre effigie;

term “History” appears frequently, always with a capital letter indicating that it is borrowed from the Marxist discourse of that period.’

³⁰For an account, see Greilsamer (220-24) and Coron (83). In the Coron catalogue, the events are recounted in the text for items 112-113, and Catalogue 113 is pictured: a poster written by Char addressed to the village of Céreste that denounces the false accusations. The gesture of this poster is to honor the truthfulness of the village where Char based his Resistance action. He would later claim that this incident turned him away from any common cause he had earlier felt with the French communist party (Greilsamer 221).

³¹ Brasillach was a writer sentenced to death for collaboration in his writings. Jean Paulhan and numerous other intellectuals wrote in public protest of the execution (Kaplan 200). Beigbeder writes: “The extra-legal purge which erupted more or less spontaneously after the departure of the German troops in various regions took a heavy toll: probably between 10 000 and 15 000 executions, when resistance groups or individuals took justice into their own hands” (196). The precise statistics are hard to determine and have been the subject of debate. See Golsan for a discussion of that debate in the context of memory studies.

Tu enchériras sur notre inclémençe.

Répète: J'avoue, pardon, punissez."

-You were noxious you were a traitor

-At my workbench I tell you I was alone
I stitched and softened the leather.

- Guilty or accused
History will say of you: "this is what he was.
I won't be so mad as to delve any deeper."
[. . .]
You'll add to our effigy
You'll swell the span of our inclemency.

Repeat this: "I confess, pardon me, punish me."

The questioner demands a confession of a likely innocent man, trying to force him to ask for pardon and punishment in the same breath. The interrogation has nothing to do with discovering truth but everything to do with constructing a fake historical drama (the effigy) that will enhance the judges' own image. The poem ends when the accused, with no way out, seizes a knife and kills himself; that was his only possible freedom. Suicide here is the only exit (the "Huis" of the title) from the scene of "History's" false representations.³²

In Arendt's view, the "treasure" of the Resistance had ended. Must we say that meaningful political resistance is, as Arendt says of revolutions, rare and unpredictable in its appearance?³³ Moments of régime-changing revolutions may be rare, but might there not be consistent and meaningful shifts away from the imposed order? There may well be an afterlife to the alternate history made by

³² Char had experience with such false pretenses to "justice": he tried to protect fellow Resistance fighters who were accused of collaboration after the war, and in 1945, refused to participate in a civilian court set up to judge alleged collaborators, or go over to the side of passing judgment. See Dupouy, who explains that Char was assigned to the "Bureau liquidateur de la SAP à Avignon," where he primarily defended other maquisards who were being wrongly accused of collaboration (145).

³³ "The history of revolutions—from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest—which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstance, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a *fata morgana*" (Arendt, "Preface" 5).

Char's Resistance writing, not in the world of policies and institutions but in other spaces where imagination, sensation and language are experienced and shared.³⁴

Char's Poetics as Dissensus

Along with post-war texts that cuttingly denounce the public discourse, Char also wrote texts offering hope and possibility: "Oui, remettre sur la pente nécessaire les milliers de ruisseaux qui rafraîchissent et dissipent la fièvre des hommes. Je tournais inlassablement sur les bords de cette croyance, je redécouvrais peu à peu la durée, j'améliorais imperceptiblement mes saisons, je dominais mon juste fiel, je redevenais journalier" (1948 "Billet à Francis Curel" *Oc* 638) 'Yes, redirect, onto their necessary beds, the thousands of streams that refresh and dissipate the fever of men. I paced around tirelessly on the edges of that belief, little by little I rediscovered my duration, I subtly improved my seasons, I mastered my justified bile, I rejoined, again, the days.'³⁵ Here, the poet may appear to play a somewhat elevated role, making the sensory elements of the world accessible to humanity and thus restoring its well-being.³⁶ But it is important that these "thousands of streams" become (metaphorically) "a belief" considered and reconsidered by a thinker in motion. His ethical stance includes the tireless commitment to turning, repeated movements along the edges of the idea: ("I paced around tirelessly on the edges of that belief"). His valuing of "duration" and "seasons" has nothing to do with a nostalgia for the wholeness of nature; rather, these words propose that thought unfolds in movement and in time, keeping ideas open-ended.³⁷ Thought, writing, and poetry are all implied to exist in the sensed

³⁴ I don't mean precisely to track Kristin Ross's use of the word "afterlife" in her study of the memory of the events of May 1968, but the term usefully points to the continuing presence and sway of the Char's resistance "treasure" in his writing. His writing, still present, can potentially influence new readers, and his ideas of shared aesthetic spaces and experiences also resonate with more recent discussions of what constitutes a political space. (See Ross 1, 215 for explanations of her use of the term "afterlife".)

³⁵ The literal translation would be "I became, once again, 'daily' or 'of the day.'" I have also translated "je tournais inlassablement" as "I paced around tirelessly," even though "back and forth" would be more idiomatically correct than "around," in order to convey the round, turning direction of the verb "tourner." This passage, significantly, is from a letter addressed to Francis Curel, a native of L'Isle sur Sorgue whom Char had known in childhood and with whom he associated the honesty of the natural world in that region.

³⁶ Bertrand Marchal discusses Char's complex relationship to a sort of romanticism *and* anti-romanticism, noting that Char can figure the poet as "Le guide de l'humanité" in a romantic vein. Marchal also shows that at the same time, Char hates messianism, "terres promises" 'promised lands,' or their "variantes historiques" 'historical variants' ("René Char et le romantisme" 59).

³⁷ Laure Michel elaborates on the historical depth and urgency of Char's resistance to the temporality of historical progress. In the post-war period, when collective action had failed, Char invents "d'autres formes du temps. . . avec d'autant plus d'urgence qu'elles doivent s'opposer à

world with its streams, seasons, and days. Movement is a crucial feature of his hope. "(L')espoir . . . est vraiment le seul langage actif, et le seul repoussoir susceptible d'être transformé *en bon mouvement*" (1950) ("Impressions anciennes" Oc 742) 'Hope . . . is really the only active language, and the only spring apt to be transformed *into good movement*.' Becoming, movement, transformation—qualities that could undo the dangers of fixed ideas and atrophied ideologies—offered hope after the violence of wartime, as we see for instance when Char wrote "DEVENIR" 'BECOME' on a copy of *Seuls demeurent* that he presented to a fellow Resistance leader.³⁸

Char's later actions in a public or political scene would never equal what they had been during the Resistance. And yet, the political and ethical importance of his Resistance action and writing continue after the war, residing in the thinking-in-sensation and the shared space of the senses that his imagery continues to represent. As he said (in Text 195, mentioned above), he wouldn't "repress" the treasure, just recognize that it would, after the end of the Resistance experience, lie at some distance from him.

Jacques Rancière has influentially argued that inequalities are grounded in the social control of aesthetic (sensed) experience. Such control, which he terms the "distribution of the sensible," is illustrated in Char's story of the high command officer who found the language of the group of Resisters too foreign to understand (Text 61), since the "distribution of the sensible" normally limits who is seen and who is heard. The uniformed officer, his ear tuned by his rank and place in the social order, cannot hear certain voices when he arrives in a place where that distribution of the sensible is not in effect. In the Resistance group, a different kind of political space existed, one that Char's writing describes by showing multiple voices, imagination, wonderment, and a shared immersion in a world of the senses where action also took place. Arendt stated that the special "freedom" of this rare time ended after the war. But Rancière defines a political importance in art that allows us to see possibilities for the power of Char's writing after the war. For Rancière, art makes a "space of presentation" that is different from ordinary experience, placing viewers or participants in a space that is suspended from the

l'utilisation, par les idéologies communistes d'après-guerre, de l'idée d'histoire comme science anticipatrice de l'action, source de terreur et d'oppression selon Char" 'other forms of time. . . all the more urgently because they must resist the use, by post-war Communist ideologies, of the idea of history as a science that can anticipate action and that is a source of terror and oppression according to Char' (13).

³⁸ The Bibliothèque Nationale catalogue describes Char's annotations on a volume of *Feuillets d'Hypnos* that he presented to Maxime Fischer, a Resistance leader in Char's region (the Vaucluse in the South of France). On the text of "La rose de chêne," Char had written "DEVENIR." The catalogue points out that this responds to the first inscription Char wrote in the volume: "On s'est assez essayé à expliquer les hommes. Il faut maintenant les faire vivre" (Catalogue 108, Coron 81) 'Enough attempts have been made to explain men. Now they must be made to live.'

normal. Art is thus political “because of the distance it takes from (society’s) functions, because of the type of space and time it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space” (Rancière 23). Further locating political content in everyday aesthetic experience, he writes:

Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them. Elsewhere, I have tried to show the sense in which politics is the very conflict over the existence of that space, over the designation of objects as pertaining to the common and of subjects as having the capacity of common speech. (24)

Char found an experience and a poetics of “dissensus”—Rancière’s term for these moments of departure from the societal norm of “distribution of the sensible.”³⁹ While he had lived it in the Resistance, and then lost it as the public sphere returned to normal, he continues it in poetry. Char’s writing does not only document a time of rare freedom, destined to end when his Resistance activities did. It also proposes, continues, and encourages the shared experience of the sensible. In nurturing the continuation of such thought, he achieves, at least between him and his readers, the dissensus theorized by Rancière.

Davide Panagia proposes that “sensation interrupts common sense” and studies ways that individuals experience a shift in their assumptions when faced with new sensations (2). As if proposing another approach to the process of dissensus, Panagia states that when our accustomed structures of sensing are interrupted or disrupted, we change. The “assurances that guarantee the slumber of subjectivity” are no longer there, and we must ask new questions about our convictions (3-4). This is political. In the fabric of *Leaves of Hypnos*, Char attended to the force of the imagination of others, and included the sensations and voices that were all no doubt part of what changed and shifted him and the individuals around him.

Char asserts that language can transform the subject perceiving the world, and the world itself: “Le mot passe à travers l’individu, définit un état, illumine une séquence du monde matériel; propose aussi un autre état” (*Oc* 743) ‘The word traverses the individual, defines a state, illuminates a sequence of the material world; also proposes another state.’ Like a description of a biological process, this

³⁹ Rancière has defined dissensus in multiple texts. In one passage, he states that the work of dissensus involves “reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible [. . .] to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals” (Rancière 25).

statement explains the relation of language, self, and world as dynamic and continual. Poetry is certainly an actor in the "material world," since it moves through the individual while simultaneously shedding light on the surrounding world: a possibility for a new state is the result.

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