

## History, Violence, and Poetics: Saint-John Perse and René Char

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At first glance, there would seem little that might connect the two poets to be compared in this essay. A closer analysis will reveal, however, that Saint-John Perse, both in his public life and in his writing, reacted to the events of World War II in ways parallel and yet opposite to the reactions of René Char.

In 1939, Perse, in the person of Alexis Léger, Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay, held a key (if not always highly visible) position in the handling of France's foreign affairs. Char, although highly politicized, played no public role in politics. But then in 1940 came the crushing defeat which, while shattering the diplomat's brilliant career and removing him from his official duties, at the same time catapulted Char to the forefront: at first mobilized on the Alsatian front, he was later to become one of the illustrious leaders of the Resistance.

However, things are not as simple as they might seem. For even though he ostensibly refrained from intervening in public affairs, the exiled Perse actively sought to influence Roosevelt's policy toward France (both the Vichy regime and De Gaulle's *France Combattante*).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, his passionate interest in international politics eventually resurfaced in the epic vision of *Vents*. As for Char, who was often directly involved in operations on the battlefield or in the maquis, he lived his military engagement as an exile. He refused to participate in the purge that followed the Liberation, and it was precisely because of his repugnance for politics that in his poetry he shunned everything that might have the slightest resemblance to a doctrine or an epic vision of history.

This rapid overview of the occupation years, arguably the most trying for modern France, has allowed us to see that history dealt a separate fate to each poet. I shall now explain how each formed

a distinctly personal idea of history and how this idea informed their respective poetics.

Let us first of all consider how each situates his work with respect to historical events. Perse makes it a point to remove his poetry from any "present political concern."<sup>2</sup> Thus he adamantly asserts in his letter to Adrienne Monnier that his poems are

... irreducible to any temporal order, freed from all instants and from all places and, on their ideal or absolute level, are written in violent reaction against every notion (even the most indirect) of "committed" literature. (552-53)

But it is exactly this "violent"—all too violent—reaction that betrays the ambiguity of Perse's position. Can a writer really cordon off his text from all unwelcome political and moral signification simply by repeated adamant disavowals? Perse's own work would seem to respond in the negative. *Vents III.4* calls ardently for "testimony for man" as well as for a real presence of the poet "with" all humanity (224), and the eloquent strains of his Nobel prize acceptance speech echo the same plea:

And thus it is that the poet finds himself linked to the historical event in spite of himself. And nothing of the drama of his time is foreign to him. (446)

On this same score, one must also ask why, in the *Oeuvres complètes*, which he personally edited, he devotes such a large number of pages to "[t]estimonies" of all sorts. This very same ambiguity appears in the life he led during the war years: while loudly voicing his solidarity in public pronouncements, he refused to join ranks with De Gaulle and maintained a rigorously insular existence vis-à-vis his compatriots.<sup>3</sup>

Char's position, while considerably less confused, turns out to be just as paradoxical, but in a diametrically opposite way: unlike Perse, he explicitly connects his writing to contemporary events. From the very first lines of his "Notes from Hypnose," he specifies just "how much [these pages] are affected by the events": "these notes mark humanism's resistance."<sup>4</sup> Some of the texts in the work can even be read as memorials dedicated to comrades in arms who sacrificed their lives in the struggle against the Nazis.

At the same time, however, Char charged those who conspicuously displayed their sorrow for the downtrodden country with "incredible and detestable exhibitionism," and throughout the entire ordeal of the occupation he refused to publish any of his own writings. The reason for such a stance is that in the face of such grave circumstances Char is at pains to assign to these "Notes" their proper value: "The sight of tortured blood once made me lose my place and reduced their importance to nothingness."<sup>5</sup> Not that he despises the written word:

Certainly we must write poems, tracing with silent ink the rage and the sorrows of our mortal temper, but it must not stop there. That would be ridiculously insufficient. (*OC* 632)

For Char then, military commitment condemns the poet to exile to the extent that, concerned primarily with his battlefield activity, he is no longer free to devote himself to writing. Obviously, this is a question of not giving oneself the illusion that one can fight a war with eloquence alone. (And Char's irreproachable record of active service is well-documented.)

Thus it is that his decision to side actively with those who were fighting to save what is most essential meant taking a leave of absence from poetry. As we read in the poem whose revealing title is "Song of Refusal: The Guerrilla's Début": "The poet has returned for many years into the father's nothingness" (*FM* 48). And it is for exactly the same reason that, in spite of the bravery that he demonstrated as a Resistant, he is anything but a boisterous war enthusiast:

I want never to forget that I have been forced to become—for how long?—a monster of justice and intolerance, a cloistered simplifier, an arctic character who is oblivious to the fate of anyone who banded together with him to slaughter the dogs of hell. (*OC* 633)

In reluctantly accepting the implacable logic of military action, Char adopted a stance opposite to that of Perse: whereas the latter stood aloof from active involvement to proclaim his devotion, the former plunged into battle, all the while deploring his loss of autonomy.

Since these poets take such different positions in face of the same events, it is not surprising that their works present history in two radically opposite ways. We shall first give closer scrutiny to the case

of Perse: one could expect that, having been so unceremoniously dropped from ranks of power, the scorned *ambassadeur* would simply turn his back on intractable history. And that is indeed the direction taken by the whole body of texts grouped together under the title of *Exile*. Nevertheless, everything leads one to believe that the bitter personal disappointment he suffered in 1940 only caused his lifelong passion for history to resurface in his poetry.

Such an inclination can be detected very early in his writing, particularly in the letters which, in divulging to his mother his personal view of China, are written in words quite revealing for our present study:

Present-day China has no longer anything to do with the literature of Hervey de Saint-Denis. . . . It [China] is nothing more for me, in all its brute reality, than a tremendous human fresco in the process of modern evolution, the bare, convulsive history of a great people worn down by their excessively long submission. . . . No, there is nothing in all that for esthetics or sightseeing. As for me, it's the spectacle that intrigues me: that of an evolution, right before my eyes, of an ancient human society in the midst of deep changes. Where movement is exerted, there always lies the interest for me. (833)

Let us not be fooled by the contempt he casts on esthetics here: though he sneers at exoticism, Perse nevertheless views Chinese events as a work of art ("fresco," "spectacle") suited to satisfying his taste for "movement." The poet elaborates on this particular interest in telling of his role during a plague:

. . . I really enjoyed this entire battle with the plague. I lived it intensely, like a great adventure that drove off a lot of endemic dullness. Shall I go further into the unmentionable? I cannot, I have never been able to keep myself from liking these works of great natural forces: floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, large epidemics and various uprisings—all disruptions of equilibrium tending to renew the élan vital of great movement running its course through the world. (My very Christian mother, you shouldn't have entrusted my Antillean childhood to the pagan hands of an excessively beautiful Hindu servant, a secret disciple of the god Shiva.) (859)

The medley of natural catastrophes and socio-political turmoils (summarily labeled "various uprisings") listed here confirms the esthetic nature of Perse's passion for history, particularly in that he tends to assimilate events to meteorological disturbances. Witness this depiction of a battle between imperial and republican Chinese armies: "That entire amazing blizzard passed through there like a blast of wind . . ." (848). This readiness to portray historical events through weather imagery tells us much about Perse's view of history. As Pierre Van Rutten puts it, "That's seeing history from the vantage point of Sirius, from a transhistorical vantage point. . . . That's seeing history as a geologist sees an eruption."<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that to the extent that it expresses the desire for an absolute the choice of such perspective is motivated by what we shall term a metaphysical passion, the aspiration to transcend the here and now.<sup>7</sup> Of course that leads to some rather immoderate claims, such as that of a quasi-mystic union with history by means of the poetic word: "Thus the work of a great poet is of universal offering. . . . To breathe with the world remains his true mediative function" (455). For Perse as for Dante, "to live is to create, and to create is to involve oneself in an eternity of history" (457).

The place in history claimed by Perse is anything but a modest one. As poet, he attributes to himself the role of a great political and military leader, like the "Duke of a people of images" (100) who doesn't intend to recognize the slightest limit to his domain.<sup>8</sup>

To the empire of the past he joins the empire of the future. . . .  
There is nothing of the future that is opened for the poet. To  
create was always to promote and to command from afar. (456)

And this is why Perse does not hesitate to assert that great poets are "Like the nomadic Conquerors masters of an infinity of space . . ." (457).

As overblown as they may be, these claims nonetheless correspond to the poetics of epic nature that emerge in *Anabase* and then resurface in *Winds*. Without taking up the thematics which have already been amply commented on, we shall now focus our attention on this poetics which allows Perse's work to present his grandiose vision of history.

Certainly no one could accuse him of having microscopic vision. Indeed, he only takes notice of phenomena that might fit into the grand

scheme of historical evolution. That is why, in the poem *Winds*, he has to adopt a vantage point overlooking the entire planet. Such a vision ignores common boundaries in order to create a cosmic space. Thus the text has us view phenomena occurring on a planetary scale, such as the winds that sweep down "on all faces of this world" and gust through "the entire world of things," breaking through all spatial barriers. Moreover, this epic vision demands the establishment of temporal depth. This is why we are made to see the actions in *Winds* against the backdrop of millennia: Perse compares the atomic research conducted by "men of science" to the quests of ancient times, for example, to those of the "robbers of Kings in Pharaoh's lower chamber" (220). *Winds* portrays the present and the particular only in order to integrate them into its vast epochal scheme.

Van Rutten's remarks are thus confirmed. As a "geologist" of human history, Perse is interested not in scattered rocks, but in the various layers of sediment capable of displaying an entire evolutionary development. What he writes about Braque's birds—which, significantly enough, he finds "charged with history" (414)—applies completely to *Winds*:

Beauty then of this word "facies," used in geology to cover historically, in their evolutionary group, all the elements of the same material in the making. (414)

From these lines, it is obvious that Perse's passion is hardly for the dry data of historical records nor the experience of those whose lot is to live historical events, but instead for a rather impersonal process—his use of "vital force" (*élan vital*) is indicative here—of Bergsonian and Hegelian inspiration.

Now, to celebrate creative evolution it is not enough simply to observe the work of the vital force as a paleontologist might. Poetic creation must also intervene, not only to create cosmic space and time, as we have seen, but also to establish a continuity between the various events depicted. Hence the importance of the march, a motif everywhere present in Perse's writing. March necessarily entails movement progressing toward some destination. The individual in *Winds* has a destiny only to the extent that he participates in this great movement. Every blast of wind recalls the cosmic breath; every collapse fits into worldwide cataclysms. The horseman's odyssey, leading him from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific and beyond,

closely retraces the steps of countless European immigrants who, after setting foot on the east coast, set out on their famous conquest of the west.

The different moments of American history can thus be distinguished from one another, with the plethora of things evoked in *Winds* constituting an "evolutionary set," "one same material in the making" (414). This same textual process can be observed even more closely in *Winds III.2*. Perse suggests that the relentless waves of people arriving in the New World follow the paths cleared by the explorers listed in *III.1*: "Once again, in the wind, men took to this way of living and ascending" (219). There follows a catalogue which, by placing side by side a wide array of immigrants, links them along two axes: one synchronic, joining men of various social groups ("people of Papacy" and "great Reformers," for example); the other diachronic, tying together various periods of American history, ranging from the arrival of the Puritans to the advent of the atomic era. As diverse as they might appear, the men mentioned in *Winds III* all participate in a common adventure: in many divergent ways, humans "head into the wind" with fierce determination (217). The present acquires meaning only if viewed in the perspective of the "evolutionary set" that reveals its destiny.

We are now in a position to see how, driven by his metaphysical passion, Perse tends to transform history into metaphysics. Indeed, the poetics of epic that we have just outlined follows the same tendencies which, according to Lévinas, dominate Western philosophy. By the alchemy of the word, the philosopher (like the poet) seeks the metamorphosis of external reality (the Other) into a kingdom where consciousness (the Same), free of all limits and shortcomings, might prove itself capable of encompassing the whole of reality. We are dealing here with the ontology that reduces the Other to the Same, i.e., that claims to explain everything by incorporating phenomena into a theory (Cf. Lévinas, x, 13-16).

Of particular importance to our present discussion are the terms with which Lévinas denounces the violence hidden within this totalizing enterprise:

The face of being which shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality that dominates Western philosophy. In it individuals are reduced to bearers of forces by which they are commanded without their knowledge. From this totality individuals take their

meaning (invisible outside of this totality). The uniqueness of each present moment is constantly sacrificed to a future called upon to reveal objective meaning. For only the ultimate meaning counts, only the last act changes individual beings into themselves. They are what they shall appear to be in the already modeled figures of the epic. (x)

The violence carried by the epic vision consists first of all in envisioning phenomena *sub species aeternitatis* and, in so doing, imposing upon them a finality. This is precisely the purpose of Perse, who everywhere and in everything seeks out the "movement" of the vital force. In order to be able to assimilate a deadly battle with a storm, to see in an outbreak of the plague and in other natural catastrophes a salutary renewal of cosmic energy, in other words, in order to view the tragedies of history as a geologist observes an eruption, a passionate interest in the impersonal forces that determine the fate of individuals is obviously required. But a singular disregard for the violence suffered by the victims is also required.

In any event, Perse considers the destruction and death wrought by this "bare, convulsive" history to be mere vicissitudes, accidents (especially in the philosophical sense), or minor setbacks. On that score, his "Stockholm Speech" turns out to be even more eloquent than the secrets divulged to his mother in his letters from China:

The worst upheavals of history are but seasonal rhythms in a greater cycle of concatenations and renewals.

"Fear not," says History, finally lifting her mask of violence—and with her hand uplifted, she makes the conciliatory gesture of the Asiatic Divinity at the height of her destructive dance.<sup>9</sup> (446)

And thus we see violence reduced to a passing phenomenon, a mere appearance ("mask") which, since it does not endanger the vitality of the species ("the great human strain constantly in the process of creation"), should not give rise to undue fears.<sup>10</sup>

That is doubtless the reason why Perse does not see fit to reserve a place in *Winds* for the dreadful violence that marked American history in the colonial wars, in the abduction of Africans into slavery, the Civil War and the conquest of the West. On the contrary, these bloody and hardly glorious chapters are somehow lost in the prodi-

gious succession of landscapes, peregrinations, and cavalcades that *Winds* spreads out before us.

In fact, all specific facts tend to fade out of the picture, especially since Perse carefully avoids designating them by proper nouns. He rather portrays personages by naming their social function ("Captains," "Legates," "Viceroys," "Governors," "Chaplains") or by their occupation ("Researchers," "Commentators," "objectors and conspirators"). The importance of generic designation must also be stressed here. The poet of *Winds* sings of "the rising up of men," "the earth," the foreigner," "the flesh of women," "women," "the rivers" and "the cities" (199-201). *Winds* remains so allusive that it is impossible to connect specific textual elements with specific persons and incidents. This feature demonstrates the epic's tendency to totalize: in order to integrate the individual into the system, Lévinas tells us, ontology must "neutralize" it, i.e., get rid of the unique and the intangible (13-16).

We shall now return to Char, whose writing conspicuously reveals everything that Perse ignores. Instead of exorcizing violence by assimilating it to a grandiose display of cosmic forces, Char's texts focus our attention on the unbearable sight of human destruction. Commenting on the cleaning of a revolver stained with blood, Char uses a powerful metonymy to give the term "dirty work" (*sale boulot*) its full meaning (*FM* 217). Even more significant in this respect is the scene of horror he paints in relating the aftermath of a raid by the Vichy Militia:

Like a dead partridge, so appeared to me this poor bedridden man whom the Militia had murdered at Vachères after having stripped him of the old clothes he had, accusing him of lodging resisters. Before finishing him off, the bandits played for a long while with a girl who had taken part in their expedition. With an eye torn out, his chest bashed in, the innocent man absorbed this hell and THEIR LAUGHTER.

(We captured the girl.) (*FM* 111-12)

We should take notice of the solemnity of this balance-sheet of atrocity, particularly in the last two sentences. The poet takes full stock of the horror without trying to diminish it in any way. No victory shall be able to repair this absolute destruction. The damage cannot be undone.

If Char cannot bring himself to brush away such images of suffering, it is because, unlike epic poets, he does not indulge in considering history from the vantage point of Sirius. To be sure, he does occasionally view the human against the backdrop of cosmic space, but his attention remains firmly focused on individuals in their personal existence.

The poem "Elements" is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Although the title would seem to announce a poem on the impersonal components of the universe, we are informed before the first line that it is in fact dedicated "To the memory of Roger Bonon killed in May 1940 (North Sea)." Indeed, Char places the whole poem in the context of an individual tragedy by using proper names to designate a specific historical moment, place, and person. This particular emphasis brings out all the differences between Char and Perse with regard to their manner of viewing history. The image of a volcano in eruption, which serves as a backdrop for the entire first paragraph, deserves special notice:

This woman, staying clear of the crowded street, held her child in her arms as a half-consumed volcano holds its crater. The words that she confided to him ran slowly through her head before reaching the the lethargy of her mouth. There emanated from these two beings, one of whom weighed scarcely less than a star's shell, an obscure exhaustion which soon would no longer tense up and would slip into dissolution, that precocious end of the downtrodden. (*FM* 34)

Instead of observing this catastrophe like a geologist awed by the display of natural forces, Char focuses his attention on two human beings literally cut off from the world, that is, removed from the course of events ("clear of the crowded street") and severed from the vital force (since they are doomed to "exhaustion" and even "dissolution.") This text presents us, then, a sort of *pi ta* free of any mysticism. In the figure of this woman hugging her dying child, we see those left by the wayside in the march of history: "In their view, the worlds had ceased to confront each other, if they ever had" (*FM* 34). We are now able to appreciate the full semantic breadth of the title "Elements": rather than celebrating a great discharge of energy, Char depicts this eruption in order to give infinite weight to an individual

woe: "one weighed no less than a star's shell" (*FM* 34). Char considers such suffering to be the "elements," that which constitutes the essential and even the driving force of our existence: "that vulnerability which dares show its face binds us closely" (*FM* 35).

This commitment to those trampled under the feet of history is all the more remarkable since Char proves capable of conceiving an undertaking of epic dimensions in the very same text: "I foresee the day when a few men will straightforwardly set out on the journey of the energy of the universe" (*FM* 35). Char nevertheless keeps from getting carried away by such heady thoughts, for he prefers to seek out grandeur elsewhere:

Doubt is at the origin of all grandeur. Historical injustice does its utmost not to mention it. (*FM* 140)

Grandeur resides in the departure that binds. Exemplary beings are of vapor and wind. (*FM* 147)

While Perse's epic in all its verbal splendor touts a poetry of presence and abundance, Char values the intangible, hardly capable of entering into a vast synthesis. The themes of absence and doubt, which are so frequent in his poetry, are on the contrary suited, if not for opening breaches in history, at least for clearing away all epic delusions.

Let us remember that in order to compose his vast tableau, the epic poet must have the advantage of a transcendent perspective. Char, however, restricts himself to considering history from within, that is, from the time and place that circumstances dictate. This not only means pointing out places and persons unambiguously, it also prevents him from trying to see, understand and embrace everything. One single sentence is sufficient for him to express this most anti-epic perception:

We are like the toads that, in the austere night of the marshes, call out and do not see each other, making all the fate of the universe give with their cry of love. (*FM* 120)

Nothing could be farther from a fresco of universal history than his "austere night of the marshes" that conveys an entirely different perception of the course of events, if not the impossibility of any global

perception. Nothing could be less suited to exemplifying the dynamism of creative evolution than these pitiful creatures who, far from celebrating a universal march, add a dissonant note and thus figure the gap separating personal existence and "all the fate of the universe."

Just as each particular moment is for Perse but one tiny thread that must be woven into the great tapestry of history, the particular and the immediate take on immeasurable dimensions for Char. Witness the account of a parachute drop of military supplies that went wrong and caused a fire. Once again, a single sentence conveys the entire tragedy: "Crazed squirrels, from the top of the pine trees, jumped into the blaze, minuscule comets" (*FM* 100). The fiery death of these tiny animals is thus transformed into an event of cosmic proportions. We have here one of the constants of Char's writing which is appreciably more intense when he speaks of a woman he loves. A single aspect of the person comes to constitute an entire realm. Char thus celebrates "the figure of your domain" (*FM* 22), "the infinite ring of air" and the "fine neighborhoods of your imagination" (*FM* 24), "the golden summer of her hands" (*FM* 132), images which cannot be integrated into any global vision precisely because each constitutes its own world.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, Char brings great worldwide upheaval back to a human level, as we see in his observations about the Nazis:

What extermination project ever concealed its ends less than this one? . . . On this scale, our globe would be nothing more, this evening, but the lump of a tremendous cry in the throat of a tortured infinity. (*OC* 633)

This "cry" comes precisely from those who have to pay the dreadful cost of the great leaps and bounds of history.

In all the texts cited here, we are dealing not with an attempt to articulate any sort of philosophy of history, but rather with an effort to keep history at a distance. If the weight of events bears heavily on everything Char wrote during the war and the occupation, it is because he considers them not as a rendezvous with history, but as encroachments on the personal realm. He even indicates the precise date (September 3, 1939) of this intrusion of "The Oriole":

The oriole entered into the capital of dawn.  
 The sword of his song closed the sorrowful bed.  
 All came to an end forever. (*FM* 33)

The image of the sword and the use of the *passé simple* in these three short sentences so tersely rolled off suggest that the outbreak of war has irreparably slashed sensitive human fiber.

One easily surmises that Char would scarcely think of celebrating the unleashing of such forces. And indeed he sets out in exactly the opposite direction: numerous texts put huge breaks that have been caused by the course of events and which tend to alienate human beings from history and from others conspicuously before the reader: "For some, prison and death. For others, the seasonal movement of the word" (*FM* 19). The division of this line into two symmetrical parts stresses the theme of separation which is brought out noticeably near the end of the text: "One dimension crosses the fruit of the other. Opposing dimensions. Deported . . ." (*FM* 19). Placed at the beginning of *Furor and Mystery*, this "Argument" evokes exiles of all sorts which have marked both the individuals and the writings of that time.

Instead of merely describing such literal separations, Char emphasizes the discontinuities tracing the borders between consciousness and all that proves impervious to consciousness:

*Between* reality and its exposition, there is your life which magnifies reality, and this Nazi abjection which devastates its exposition. (*FM* 117)

We are fighting on the bridge thrown *between* vulnerable being and its ricochet on the walls of absolute power. (*FM* 134)

*Between* the world of reality and me, there is no more than a layer of sadness.<sup>12</sup> (*FM* 135 emphasis mine.)

Hence there can be no question of a march: the confrontation of human beings with the events of history rather entails such discontinuities. The poet must for that very reason face "the mysterious depressions, the absurd inspirations rising up from the great exterior crematory" (*FM* 101). This image reveals not only a schism between existence and history, but also history's true character. The history

that we see through the texts of Char advances like a steamroller, crushing everything in its path. Far from leading to any salutary renewal, great cataclysms only destroy the fabric of humanity.

Obviously, it is totally out of the question for Char to reaffirm any bonds with history. Even when events require military engagement, he must somehow reserve for himself a personal space, a shelter which is out of history's reach and where all that must remain inviolable can be protected. If he readily recognizes the necessity of a collective effort against the Nazis, he specifies that his engagement—which we know to be unimpeachable—does not consist in throwing himself body and soul into a particular historical movement. Thus he straightforwardly demands “his just part in the common destiny at the center of which his singularity fits in, but refrains from any amalgamation” (*FM* 146).

That is exactly why Char tells right away in the “Argument” of *Furor and Mystery* that “man flees asphyxiation” (*FM* 19). Further, he emphasizes this “resistance of humanism” that must “keep the inaccessible field free for the fancy of its suns” (*FM* 85), and which must do its utmost to “guarantee the existence of the thin stream of dream and escape” (*FM* 118).

Char seeks not to integrate himself into history but to differentiate himself from it, i.e., to preserve jealously all that distinguishes the human person from faceless vitality:

. . . Being is supposedly defined in relation to its cells, its heredity, its brief or prolonged lifespan. . . Nevertheless there exists between *all that* and Man an enclave of surprises and metamorphoses whose access must be defended and whose maintenance must be kept up. (*FM* 127)

So instead of acclaiming a universal vitality, Char confines himself to expressing his attachment to a world and to beings he knows intimately. If he occasionally groups together examples of them, we must note that such enumeration does not serve to establish a continuity between diverse phenomena, but on the contrary, to convey the infinite richness of the present instant:

Counter-terror is this little valley that fog fills little by little; it is the fleeting rustle of leaves like a swarm of numbed fuses; it is the equally distributed pull of gravity; it is this padded move-

ment of animals and insects drawing a thousand lines on the tender shell of the night; it is this little spot of violet on the dimpled cheeks of a caressed face; it is this fire of the moon that will never be a fire; it is a minuscule tomorrow whose intentions are unknown to us; it is this brightly colored torso who bent down and smiled; it is the shadow, a few steps away, of a short, squatting companion who thinks that the leather of his belt is going to give. . . . What matter then the time and the place where the devil has made a rendezvous! (*FM* 123)

The counter-terror offered here is the exact opposite of metaphysical passion. Instead of using an enumeration to constitute a single network ("the same material in the making," as Perse puts it, that assembles the dispersed and places them under one heading) from the various elements named, Char provides a number of synecdoches of counter-terror, with each image becoming a radiant source of suggestivity.

We can now proceed to a general review of the two poets' outlooks on history and the respective textual practices stemming from them. Rudely dismissed from his historical role within the official state apparatus, Perse devoted himself to poetry which ultimately came back to celebrating an epic vision of history. Everything would indicate that he needed a poetic vision on the level of his passion. For him as for Dante, it was a matter of "celebrating one same energy, which wants to be harmony" (451), of "recreating primordial unity and reuniting with all being man, who has been shattered by history" (455). Perse strives literally to incorporate everything, to fit everything into his teleological vision of history, i.e. (as we have said with Lévinas) to reduce the Other to the Same.

Now to the extent that such a vision leads either to ignoring all the cruelty and injustice suffered by those who have to live disasters or to condoning the brutality of history by considering its events as simple intermediary steps without any ultimate importance, this approach turns out to be violent. This poetics of the epic could moreover be accused of doing violence to the facts. For in order to construct an epic, the poet must, in writing, cover wounds with a rich fabric of periods, fill in the gaps with an abundance of images, and, most importantly, assemble all dispersed beings in a vast synthesis of creative evolution.<sup>13</sup>

While Perse strives to illustrate an unquestionable presence with

writing that overflows with images and echoes of all sorts and thus to unite himself with the great forces of History, Char much more modestly sets about to "give value back quickly to the prodigy of human life in all its relativity" (OC 638). Hence his contempt for the grandiose: denouncing "spells and legends" as well as "the exaggeration and excess" that have nourished so many historical illusions—illusions whose seriousness is well-known since 1940—Char is intent on reminding us that "reality is the least tangible of truths" (OC 644, 647). The paradox would have it that, even while very explicitly linking his texts to historical events, he only deepened the faults splitting personal existence away from history.

Accordingly, he offers a poetry not of presence, but of absence.<sup>14</sup> Rather than claiming to reach a global vision, his texts remain partial in every sense of the word, composed of "pulverized" poems shattering all systematic schemes. They are devoid of any desire to embrace universal history or to assimilate historical phenomena to spectacular displays of cosmic energy. And in place of the grand periodic fluxes that are the trademark of Perse's style in *Winds*, we find in "Notes from Hypnos" a rather fragmentary set of writings blending rapid sketches, maxims, penetrating meditations, lyric flights, and accounts of field action. The breaks in tone and the discontinuity of perspective as well as content correspond to the ups and downs in the life of the resistance fighter René Char. While Perse attempts to transcend such vicissitudes by bonding together with what he believes to be the march of creative evolution (i.e., history), Char is content to examine the human destruction that history strews along its path. In so doing, Char's texts make us wary of "truths that authorize killing" (FM 96), and thus, on a metaphysical level, actually lead in the direction of non-violence, even though Char the resistance fighter engaged in violent operations in the field of duty.

## Notes

1. For a thorough treatment of the subject, see Julian Hurstfield, "Les Émigrés français aux Etats-Unis et la politique américaine envers la France (1940-1944)" in *Espaces de Saint-John Perse 3* (Aix en Provence: Université de Provence, 1981).
2. Saint-John Perse, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 553. This edition contains all citations of Perse's work to be made here. All English translations in this article are my own.

3. Perse himself says as much in his *Lettres à L'Etrangère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) namely in the one dated October 6, 1940, 65.
4. René Char, *Fureur et mystère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 85. This work will subsequently be cited as *FM*.
5. René Char, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 632. This work will subsequently be cited as *OC*.
6. Pierre van Rutten, "Vents et le destin américain" in *Espaces de Saint-John Perse* 3, 236.
7. Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 3.
8. The peremptory pronouncements of this "Duke" clearly illustrate the poet's great claims:

. . . with the earth as vast as my desire, and who will set limits to it this evening? . . . with violence in the sage's heart, and who will set limits to it this evening?" (97)

See Steven Winspur, *Saint-John Perse and the Imaginary Reader* (Geneva: Droz, 1988), 21-54, for a masterful explanation of the epic nature of *Anabase*.

9. We find once again the "Shivaism" manifested in his letters from China as well as in his own description of the violence of *Winds*. See 859 and 553 respectively.
10. Even more explicit in this respect is the note "Sur l'optimisme en politique" ("On Optimism in Politics") that Perse placed under the heading "Témoignages politiques" ("Political Testimonies") in his *Oeuvres Complètes*. The poet-diplomat scarcely conceals his contempt for those who do not incarnate cosmic energy. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Reasons for optimism? They are above all of a vital nature: life gives back a thousand to whoever gives it a hundred; it takes a thousand away from whoever denies it a hundred.

Woe to the uncertain and the parsimonious! One perishes by default much more than by excess. Life is all action; inertia is death. The final stage in the decay of radium is lead.

Thus for societies as for individuals, the taste for energy, the first source of optimism, is a basic instinct of organic integrity. Pessimism is not only a sin against nature, it is an error in judgment as much as a desertion. It is the "sin of the mind," the only irredeemable one.

A few tse-tse flies (we all are acquainted with some in our midst) could not possibly prove us guilty of sleeping sickness. . . . (597-98)

Of course we can readily appreciate the bitter irony of these cavalier sentences tossed off in 1936, especially since they come from someone who had his share of responsibility in the total failure of French diplomacy. But there is also something rather embarrassing in this precocious sociobiology, given the ideological context of the time.

11. This analysis could be extended to the cosmic images and to the spatial transformations that they bring about in many of Char's other poems, namely in "Devoir" ("Duty," *FM* 43), "Mission et révocation" ("Mission and Revocation," *FM* 82), and "Météore du 13 août" ("The Meteor of August 13," *FM* 202). Moreover, the "météores hirondelles" ("swallow meteors," *FM* 132) recall the squirrels characterized as "minuscule comets."

12. Cf. the poem "Maison Doyenne" ("Senior House"), whose title unmistakably recalls "maison *mitoyenne*" ("dividing or intermediate house"). Jean-Claude Mathieu's analysis calls these thematics of separation to our attention (106). See also #155 of the "Feuillets d'Hypnos" (*FM* 127) that is commented on in the present essay.

13. It would of course be ridiculous to attribute this textual practice to some diabolical intention on Perse's part. Arguably, his achievement consists in having written a sumptuous epic with the sublime intention of celebrating universal harmony to be brought about through the march of history. However, it should not be forgotten that in the course of actual historical events—and perhaps not incidentally in the very American history that Perse clearly sought to celebrate—it is precisely with the highest ostensible aims that the some of the worst acts of violence have been perpetrated.

14. Cf. Nathan Bracher, "Char et l'écriture de l'autre: une poétique de l'absence" in *French Forum* 15.2 (May 1990):221-37.

## Works Cited

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