

A Poem by René Char

Translated by Thomas Merton

In the late summer of 1966 Thomas Merton was becoming very interested in the work of the contemporary French poet René Char (1907-1988). In an August 18 journal entry, he writes, "Have had difficulties for some time with the verse of René Char – finding it impenetrable. Today I think I have broken through," and quotes an "exquisite" seven-line poem in which, he says, "I recognized my own kind of poetic world, which, in many French poets, I simply cannot." He then adds, "after this they all connect and I laugh," and quotes two more lines from an unidentified poem.¹ Subsequent journal entries and letters document his growing fascination. Four days later he writes, "Then read more René Char. He has to be read aloud. Compact, rich, intense, full, much music, more austere and self-contained than Saint-John Perse. I must really read him now. It will take time and attention to absorb all that is there. Perhaps a long course of reading, in the full afternoons out under the trees!" (LL 117); on August 27 he notes, "went out to woods, and read René Char. Two splendid poems: the 'Meteor of Aug. 13' and 'La Sorgue'" (LL 118). In early September he writes to poet Cid Corman,

I get too vehement but I like a certain volume of wacky sound. That is why these days I am reading quite a lot of René Char, whom I had not read before. Today, Labor Day, when I get this letter finished, I'll take off into the woods (I live in the woods anyway) with a book of René Char selections and maybe some 14th-cent. German mystic stuff. Char has the wacky oblique eloquence all right. I have two books of selections, same publisher, ten years or so apart: first one has picture of him looking like a champion bicycle racer, the other a picture that ought to have a number under it. The people that write about him try to do so in a hesitant imitation of his style, and when they happen to be a bit square the result is very funny. Must drive him out of his head. I would translate some but I understand that there are herds of people doing this now and the rights situation is complicated??²

Mention of the complications with translating Char is a reaction to comments by his friend and publisher J. Laughlin, to whom he writes on September 13, "I think I said that the Char, Gide and Camus volumes arrived and I am busy with them. I take note of what you say about the possibility of complications in translating Char. I would really like to do some one day, but don't want to get tangled up in a lot of red tape."³ The Char volume in question is evidently his *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, which he mentions in his journal four days later: "Yesterday in the woods I read the whole of René Char *Feuillets d'Hypnos* [*Leaves of Hypnos*] – powerful, compressed, authentic, rock-like and alive too. (The Sisyphus project of Resistance: necessary and inevitable!) The young murdered husband Roger, who had become to his wife the husband in whom God is given her, made me weep. The nice dog, greeting the *Maquisards* in silence. The forest fire. The execution in the village, which to save the village, they did not prevent. Thoughts of the young *Maquisards* Landscape of resistance. And so much else. I got down what is on the surface of my mind here at the moment" (LL 135).

While he tells Laughlin on September 22, "I like Char tremendously" (SL 296), by the beginning of October his enthusiasm is starting to wane somewhat; he writes in his journal for October

4, “I also read Char, at times inspired by him and at times weary of his idiom, his meta-language or para-language, which is nevertheless solid and pretty consistently brilliant. But in all these things there is the lack of an essential dimension, a central core, a real *ground*” (LL 144). Subsequent comments speak in the past tense of his reading of Char, as though he has gone on to other writers,⁴ though he does include Char in lists of influential authors in letters to young inquirers in 1967,⁵ and in a letter to Corman in March 1967 he identifies the French section⁶ of his still unpublished *Cables to the Ace* as “Char-ish” (CT 250).

In March, 1968, however, he writes to Laughlin about a project to translate Char: “Unicorn Press wants me to do a very small pamphlet such as they do, of translations from René Char. It would be only about twelve poems with the originals. They will work on the permissions. Have you any objections? I plan to pick out the poems I want to do, send the names to them, let them clear the way, then do the translations. I have no way of knowing what has and what hasn’t been done of Char (except what was in the Random House collection)”⁷ (SL 339). On April 6, he writes in his journal, “Today was peaceful. The sun finally came out after dinner. I went out to the woods, read some René Char in view of the translation I am to do for Unicorn Press,”⁸ and subsequent journal entries reveal that he continued to work on Char into the summer. On June 15 he speaks of reading “some René Char (which Jonathan Greene left with me) which I very much enjoyed again. Fascination of his language and line,” and comments, “It takes me back to the summer of 1966 when I was so much under his spell (along with all the other spells of that time!)” (OSM 130). Eleven days later he notes, “Translated a couple of poems of René Char and put them on tape” (OSM 134). On September 3, he wrote a quick note to his Lexington friend and fellow poet Jonathan Greene, who had lent him a book of Char’s poetry that he used for his translations: “I have done about four Char poems if I can find them. I’ll try to get them typed up and send them along.”⁹ But a week later, on September 10, his final day at Gethsemani before leaving for the West Coast and the Far East, he wrote to Greene: “Sorry – last minute before leaving & there is just no time to type these Char poems. You can make them out with aid of originals – all in *Retour Amant* which I’m sending. If any questions Bro Patrick here can forward them to me. If you type these, please send me copies. Also Unicorn Press I guess” (BMP 60). Greene did indeed transcribe the handwritten translations and send them on to Unicorn Press.¹⁰ Though they did not appear as a separate publication, as had originally been planned,¹¹ seven poems were printed in *Unicorn Journal* the year after Merton’s death¹² and were subsequently included in the *Collected Poems* (CP 857-59).

However, there is one Char translation in the *Collected Poems* that did not appear in *Unicorn Journal*, and that was translated not in 1968 but at the time of Merton’s first encounter with the poet, in August of 1966. In Merton’s Reading Notebook from that period, under the headnote, “Another (trans. Aug. 29),”¹³ appears a poem entitled “Allegiance” (CP 856).¹⁴ But this is not the only Char translation in this notebook. It is preceded (under the general heading “Two poems of Rene Char”) by a translation of a different Char poem, one that is not included in *Collected Poems*. It is the short poem “Chaume des Vosges,”¹⁵ which is in fact the source of the two unidentified lines from his very first journal entry on Char. Whether Merton was dissatisfied with his translation or had simply forgotten about the poem is impossible to determine; by this time the reading notebook had been sent to the Syracuse University Library, where it remains today, so if Merton had not transcribed the poem (as he evidently had its companion piece, “Allegiance”) he would no longer have access to it. While it is a short poem (as are most of Merton’s translations of Char) it is interesting not only in itself

but also because of its possible reverberations of his relationship with M., the student nurse, which coincided with his initial encounter with Char, as he obliquely noted in his June 15, 1968 journal entry about being under the spell of Char “and all the other spells of that time!”¹⁶ When he comments, “after this they all connect and I laugh,” and goes on to quote the poem’s final lines, “Dans l’absurde chagrin de vivre sans comprendre / Écroule-moi et sois ma femme de décembre” it is not impossible that the “connect[ing]” has something to do with his own experience of being “écroulé” by a “femme de décembre.” In any case, the translation is published here for the first time from the handwritten text in the Reading Notebook, with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.

Thatch of the Vosges

Beauty, my very straight, by the stars’
 Highways, at the stage
 of lamps and lacked courage
 In the crazy sorrow of living
 Without making sense
 Crumble me
 Be my December woman!

- 1 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 115-16; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 247; subsequent references will be cited as “CT” parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 294-95; subsequent references will be cited as “SL” parenthetically in the text.
- 4 See Merton’s November 10, 1966 letter to Clayton Eshleman (CT 264) and his journal entry for March 5, 1967 (LL 202).
- 5 See the letters to Mario Falsina (March 25, 1967) and Nancy Fly Bredenberg (December 11, 1967), in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 349, 361.
- 6 See *Cables to the Ace*, section 35, in *Thomas Merton, Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 418-21; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.
- 7 The “Random House collection” is a reference to *Hypnos Waking: Poems and Prose*, selected and translated by Jackson Mathews, with the collaboration of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1956), an anthology that Merton had looked at in the University of Louisville library: see the journal entry for September 10, 1966 (LL 130).
- 8 Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 79; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.
- 9 Thomas Merton and Jonathan Greene, *On the Banks of Monks Pond: The Thomas Merton/Jonathan Greene Correspondence* (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2004) 59; subsequent references will be cited as “BMP” parenthetically in the text.
- 10 See Greene’s note on this letter (BMP 60).
- 11 The projected volume would presumably have been similar to the selection of Merton’s translations from Pablo Antonio Cuadra that Unicorn did publish in a bi-lingual edition: Pablo Antonio Cuadra, *The Jaguar and the Moon*, translated from the Spanish with an Introduction by Thomas Merton (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1974).
- 12 *Unicorn Journal* 3 (1969) 53-58; Marquita Breit and Robert E. Daggy in *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1986) 318-19, 324, 326, 334, 363, list only six Char translations as appearing in *Unicorn Journal*: “At the Gates of Acrea,” “Celebrating Giacometti,” “Convergence of the Many,” “Faction du Muct,” “Fighters,” and

“Septentrion”; however “Come Dance in Baronies” is the first of seven Char translations that appeared there (thanks to Albert Romkema for confirming this inclusion). All are taken from the volume *Retour Amant* (Paris: G.L.M., 1965), as indicated in Merton’s letter to Greene.

- 13 The notebook, housed in the George Arents Research Collection of the Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY, is labeled “Aug-Sept 1966” on the cover and consists mainly of Merton’s notes on his reading of Camus, Michael Harrington’s *The Accidental Century* and Marshall McLuhan.
- 14 “Allégeance” (“Allegiance”) was the final poem in the volume *Fureur et Mystère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).
- 15 The four-line poem is dated 1939, but first appeared in 1948 in *Fureur et Mystère*. The text of the poem Merton translates is an earlier version differing from the definitive text that appears in Char’s collected works: see René Char, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983) 239 (repeated on 365) for the later version, 1172 for the version Merton translates, which had been used as the final stanza for a longer poem, “Cantonement d’Octobre,” written October 7, 1939 (798-99). The first two lines of the earlier version read: “Beauté ma toute-droite, par les routes d’étoiles, / À l’étape des lampes et du courage clos;” the later version replaces “les routes d’étoiles” with “des routes si ladres”; the two final lines of the later version read: “Que je me glace et que tu sois ma femme de décembre. / Ma vie future, c’est ton visage quand tu dors.” The Vosges is a section of eastern France in the Lorraine region, named from the mountain range in the area.
- 16 See also the entry for March 5, 1967: “Another communal hermitage is to be built in the shady spot where M. and I and the Fords had our picnic last May. I have loved to walk there all summer – reading Montale, reading René Char, or just praying and thinking. Now that too will be over. I’ll find other places” (LL 202).