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The catastrophe of translation: a reading of René Char's 'writing'
of paintings

J'écris brièvement. Je ne puis
guère m'absenter longtemps.

Réponds 'absent' toi-même,
sinon tu risques de ne pas être
compris.²

To read René Char's poetry is to encounter a theory of poetry as necessarily, and indeed inexorably, relational: each poem expresses the poet's (and the reader's) sense of a relationship, be it with the self, with the Other, with the poem, with language or with other works of art, and much of Char's critical (and, indeed, metacritical) writing explores the problematics of intra-poetic relationships. Char describes his meditations³ on other artists as a "conversation souveraine", thereby indicating a desire for the presence of an (absent) interlocutor and predicating his own works as simultaneously interlocutee and interlocutor, but also implicitly positing writing as an experience of loss - of the loss (and the continual losing) of an originary source, of the interlocutor who can be present only silently - and absently - in the discourse of the poet.

The refusal of etiologies informs all of Char's thinking and such volumes as Recherche de la base et du sommet and Retour Amont trace the source in order precisely to go beyond it and to explore the realms of the pre-source. This preoccupation with that which precedes the origin is doubled by a concern with Heideggerian Presence, with movements of aletheia, with the happening of nuptial union within his texts. Char's poetry is marked by his constant meditation on the dialectic of absence and presence, the latter having philosophical and moral force only when the polar opposition is deconstructed, and presence and absence are seen to contain each other, neither having priority or primacy. Char's poems are all traces, and themselves often contain images of the trace, a present sign of present absence;

they witness to his passage as poet, to his having-been-(t)here and also signal that he has both absented himself and re-presented himself. It is thus that we may comprehend both his reluctance to distance himself from 'autrui' by the act and the process of writing and his supplementary affirmation that one must declare oneself absent in order to permit understanding: the understanding of an Other is possible only if that Other is perceived as different (as non-presented), thus generating a dialectic within alterity which will lead to a transcendence of polar oppositions, to a going-beyond of the flux of temporality in a union which contains difference in a moment of Presence.

In his Introduction to Yves Battistini's translation Héraclite d'Ephèse, Char valorizes Heraclitus's philosophy-poetry by affirming:

... Héraclite possède ce souverain pouvoir ascensionnel qui frappe d'ouverture et doué de mouvement le langage en le faisant servir à sa propre consommation. Il partage avec ⁴autrui la transcendance tout en s'absentant d'autrui.

Poetic language must open up and dynamize language by rendering it self-consuming, that is to say by making it both present (presently self-altering) and self-absenting.

What excites Char in the works of Heraclitus, especially in his post-Surrealist writings, is not the Platonic panta rhei interpretation which may be summarised as 'All things are constantly flowing', but Heraclitus's insistence on the Logos which is, whereas the changing phenomena become according to its laws - and it is important to remember that the Logos is an extension of the metron (the measure and regulator of all change). It is the permanence of change as rest (which is not to say that there is rest in change) that attracts Char, who later associates this notion with the Heideggerian concept of art as the setting-itself-into-work of truth. For Char, as for Heidegger, the work of art unconceals Being, and all precedent states and sources become unbeing - though there is no causal relationship between the work and everything which precedes it. Indeed, logic and causality are of little importance in many of

Char's poems, as, for example, in 'La manne de Loia Abba'⁵ where the encounter with the 'ghost' of Loia Abba generates the poem but is not a causal or natal origin, providing rather a model of enigma which is translated into a poetic and therefore autonomous form.

Much of Char's explicitly relational poetry takes the form of creative translation, of misprision, notably in his painting-poems 'Courbet: les casseurs de cailloux'⁶ and 'Une Italienne de Corot',⁷ his first texts 'inspired'⁸ by paintings. In 1938, when sending them to Cahiers d'art,⁸ he wrote to the editor Christian Zervos:

Je me permets de vous envoyer à tout hasard pour vos cahiers ces deux poèmes un peu particuliers puisqu'ils tendent à l'ambition de "romancer" des oeuvres déjà fort suggestives. J'ai surtout souhaité traduire sans instruction, intuitivement puis nécessairement leur relief épais d'émotion dans le sens où les modèles auraient pu se prononcer en s'apercevant à travers le peintre. Complications de la poésie... Simplicité de la peinture....⁹

This declaration of intention is almost a manifesto of Char's theory of relational poetry. The very act of sending his "poèmes un peu particuliers" to Cahiers d'art "à tout hasard" witnesses to Char's awareness of the cultural ghettos which compartmentalize art, according no place to works which transgress the established boundaries. More importantly for the purposes of this article, Char sees his poems as translations, as rewritings and therefore as miswritings. To translate implies a relationship of desire with the 'texte de départ', but in Char's case, as, I suspect, with all creative translation, it also articulates both a rejection of that primary source and a desire to abolish it by the act of rewriting it. Furthermore, to translate when (mis-)naming the inspirational source, as Char does, is to enter explicitly into conflict with the precursor-artist.

Char's notion of poetry is itself one of conflict and resistance, as he constately reiterates in such metapoetic statements as "Je n'écrirai pas de poème d'acquiescement".¹⁰ Yet the

engagement in conflict by a poet of great moral seriousness witnesses to a believed commitment to the tenets of pre-Socratic philosophy - Indeed, Char's preoccupation with justice and conflict is exemplified in a fragment of his precursor Heraclitus:

Il faut savoir que l'univers est une lutte, la justice un conflit, et que tout le devenir est déterminé par la discorde.¹¹

For Heraclitus, Strife (or War) is the determining agent in existence, is the ground of becoming,¹² and indeed his philosophy is based on the notion of balanced strife between opposites. This doctrine of war between the elements is developed by Empedocles who sees Love as a universal unifying force within the physical world and, significantly, as a force equal to Hate or Strife which is an exterior force.¹³ Empedocles's theory of a cycle of becoming,¹⁴ like the Hegelian concept of dialectic, was attractive to all the Surrealists, influencing Breton's definitions of surreality in the first Manifeste du surréalisme, but a major aspect of Empedocles's philosophy not explored by most of the Surrealists which is essential for an understanding of Char's relational poetry is the notion of catastrophe. In the 1945 edition of Le marteau sans maître, Char uses two pre-Socratic fragments as epigraphs, one from Heraclitus ("il faut aussi se souvenir de celui qui oublie où mène le chemin") and one from Empedocles ("J'ai pleuré, j'ai sangloté à la vue de cette demeure inaccoutumée").¹⁵ The choice of the Heraclitus fragment indicates Char's belief that reading, like writing, thinking and living is a process which involves both progression and remembering - which exist in a relationship of complementarity to each other. The choice of the Empedocles fragment, on the other hand, reveals Char's awareness of alienation from the 'home' one discovers. The sense of difference from the place one 'suddenly' inhabits is central to Char's theory of relational poetry which predicates that catastrophe marks (and even defines) the relationship of the poet with the space he appropriates as the ground of his creation - and of his creativity.

In one of his studies of influence and intertextuality, Harold Bloom asserts that catastrophe is "the central element in

poetic incarnation".¹⁶ Freud also explicitly recognizes Empedocles as a precursor, differentiating however between his own theory of the instincts and Empedocles's as follows:

... the Greek philosopher's theory is a cosmic phantasy while ours is content to claim biological validity. At the same time, the fact that Empedocles ascribes to the universe the same animate nature as to individual organisms robs this difference of much of its importance.¹⁷

Here Freud is preparing a deconstruction of his own 'anxious' need to differ from his precursor, but Bloom refuses this reading of Empedocles's theory affirming:

Catastrophe is, alas, not a fantasy but is the macro-cosmic synecdoche of which masochism and sadism form microcosmic parts. It is not self-destruction that energizes the death-drive but rather the turning of aggression against the self. Freud's astonishing originality is that, in Beyond the pleasure principle, he sees catastrophe as being itself a defense, and I would add that catastrophe-creation is thus a defense also.¹⁸

Bloom's interpretation of catastrophe-creation as defence is seductive, but it undervalues the aggressivity (and aggression) implicit in any intertextual manoeuvre - which is attack as well as defence, since Strife is necessary in order to effect individuation; and here I would suggest that the principle of 'strife' should not necessarily be associated with the death instinct, but may, in fact, be a creative form of attack on the precursor-artist and the precursor-text. Attack and defence are not, of course, polar opposites, but the aggression deployed by Char in his 'translations' of artists' work is directed both against the writing/thinking self and against the object (without being narcissistic).

Char's description of the stages of his desire to translate ("sans instruction, intuitivement puis nécessairement") merits close examination. The movement of creation (translation) begins with an awareness of absence, of absence of the knowledge necessary to effect the task of understanding (in culturally con-

ditioned terms) the precursor - and subsequently of supplanting him. A second process is one of intuition which, for Bergson, is a form of 'sympathie' with the object of knowledge, but which is also a form of 'guessing' and the ground of a libidinal drive (in that desire prevails over any cognitive intent). The final stage of the will to creation is that of necessity, the need to alter and thus to supplant the precursor/source.

In the case of Char's painting-poems, creation is translation (though not, of course, wholly so) and thereby poses radical questions about the nature of intertextuality. E.A. Nida proposes that translation is ultimately possible, except where the form of the primary utterance is an essential element of the message.¹⁹ To translate (into language) a painting is to venture into uncharted territories of intertextuality, since a painting is not necessarily a text (at least, not in the senses understood by most theorists of intertextuality). However, a painting is 'read' by the spectator as a semantic unit, as a meaningful text. As Gabriel Bauret affirms:

...le tableau n'existe que parce qu'on (y) lit, ou encore parce qu'on le lit.

Le tableau invite le spectateur à le ré-écrire (le parcours du regard de la surface du tableau est en quelque sorte déjà une ré-écriture), à le réévaluer, ou peut-être même tout simplement à écrire, à produire un autre texte, différent, son propre texte, à partir des signifiants qu'il met en scène, mais aussi ceux dont dispose le langage verbal.²⁰

The spectator can enter into a full aesthetic relationship with a painting only if he reads it - and to read it is to enter into strife with it, as the late-comer finds meaning which he must alter in order to make it more meaningful. It is the quest for full(er) meaning which characterizes Char's relational poetry, as he evokes, in his letter, the "relief épais d'émotion" which is perceived as needing the supplement of translation.

Char articulates a desire to "romancer", to 'novelize' the paintings - and this project necessarily involves a deforming of their signifying function and even perhaps of their signifying

power. Yet the works Char creates (and intends to create) are poems: they can evidently not be paintings, but neither are they novels. The very placing of inverted commas round "romancer" is meaningful, since it signals that the poet's use of this term is already a translation of its usual denotation - the addition of the inverted commas both adds to, and subtracts from, the sense of the term "romancer". The inverted commas are not mere punctuation marks; they are a necessary, and dangerous, supplement, which point to a desire to translate from one genre to another, while also translating the definition of such a transposition and showing that there is as yet no adequation between such transformationary operations and their descriptive metalanguage. The term "romancer" can signify fully only when it is supplemented by the inverted commas, when, through the use of inverted commas, its meaning is presented as adequate only when its very inadequacy is shown to be part of its essence as meaning.

The translation of paintings into poems is itself inadequate as re-creation of the inspirational sources and can establish meaning only by failing to translate, by being other than the paintings - hence the necessity to re-say (in altered forms) the names of the paintings. Thus, in the titles of the poems, the poet defends himself aggressively against the paintings' authority by entering into conflict with them and re-naming them: Les casseurs de pierre becomes 'Courbet: les casseurs de cailloux'; Molssonneuse tenant une faucille becomes 'Une Italienne de Corot'. The poet also refuses to accept the death of the painters' models, electing to resurrect them through an act of speculation; his intent is to translate the emotion of the paintings "dans le sens où les modèles auraient pu se prononcer en s'apercevant à travers le peintre".

Already in 1933, Salvador Dalí could affirm, to the general acclaim of the Surrealists, that the painter, by an act of metaphorical cannibalism, abolishes the model²¹ and Char himself closes his great Surrealist poem 'Artine' with the statement "Le poète a tué son modèle".²² In the first edition of the 'Artine', this sentence is separated from the rest of the poem by two blank pages and consequently functions as a commentary on the poem while also functioning within it - the metapoetic is thus contained within the poetic, outside and inside are deconstructed as

polar opposites, commentary as condensed translation offers itself up to translation by the rest of the poem. Throughout 'Artline', the model (Artline) is 'presented' as absent, the poem being the trace of her passage. Indeed, the writing of a poem would seem to necessitate the exclusion of the model (or referent), since the poetic text is essentially a mark of absence and desire. The writing - as killing of the model - involves a valorization of subjectivity, but the aggressivity which generates the image of the murder indicates also that the model/referent, though presented in the text as absent, is still present through the poet's awareness of a continuing relationship with her as Other.

In the painting-poems, however, the polarity subjective/objective is subverted by means of the revisionary recuperation, or resurrection, of the model: in the poem, the model is rescued from death (or incorporation) in order to confront itself, to see itself subjectively as object - while simultaneously remaining object of the painting which is both absented by the poetic text's titrological manipulations and made present by these same intertextual manoeuvres. The dead models rise again, then, to inhabit their former abodes - or, rather, to appropriate them from without through language. The poet supplants the precursor-painter, offering a reading of the painting and thereby positing it as a semantic unit rather than as pure figure. This reading - which is essentially a miswriting - of the painting challenges the authority of the figural image, and the poet also enters into direct conflict with the painter, whose signature is amputated (G. Courbet becomes 'Courbet', C. Corot becomes 'Corot').

The reader of Char's texts encounters a struggle for primacy and presence, where the poet strives to prevail over the influence of the painters. Indeed, the reader finds the phenomenon which Bloom calls apophrades or the return of the dead;²⁵ Char, who is undoubtedly a strong poet (in Bloom's terms), achieves "the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in his work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even necessarily to be lessened by one's greater splendor. The mighty dead return but they return

In our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own".²⁴ Bloom's theory is one of intra-poetic relationships, but it can be 'translated' to the domain of poet-painter relationships: and here the "mighty dead" are the painters Courbet and Corot. The poet cannot, of course, exploit the "événementiel" potentiality of colour and plasticity and knows that he cannot engage battle with his precursor on the latter's chosen terrain; consequently, he goes beyond/behind the source of the poem (the painting) in order to attack the precursor on the field of the pre-source (the model).²⁵

In the discourses which constitute Char's poems, the models comment on the paintings after the painter has substituted his own subjectivity for theirs, but by this very act they supplement the paintings and re-establish their precedence. If the painters return on the apophrades to haunt Char, his strength is sufficient to ensure that he triumphs over them and makes us read their work differently. By resurrecting the dead models and castrating the precursors (through the strategy of amputating their signatures which are both the marks of a possessional desire and the signs that the signatory accepts dispossession), the poet asserts his own authority. Yet he too signs his works, but he reserves the right to his Christian name, thereby establishing, one might suggest, a greater degree of subjective possession over the discourses which he attributes to the models in order to create 'his' poems.

It would seem, though, that Char's attitude to the models is radically different than that of the painters. First of all, when Char transforms the nature and function of the model in the poem, he is treating the model of another artist, that is to say an object of art which has already been translated, denied existence in the world outside the world of art. The model of the painter is the sitter, whereas that of the poet is the painting which contains the transformed sitter but which cannot ultimately maintain him/her within its cryptogrammatic rhetoric - indeed the implicit (and intended) reference to the 'outside' world undermines the autotelic status of painting. As I shall suggest later, the Char painting-poem explicitly recognises the necessity of the strategic translation of the sitter by the

painter, but it seems important at this point to emphasize that the discourse of the model comments on the painting from without - and this positing of an outside, which is, on one level, a topological manoeuvre, serves also to deconstruct the inside/outside polarity which so often governs and defines consideration of the relationship of 'art' and 'reality'. The model of the painting is perceived as a model, but the very status of the model is questioned: the works of Corot and Courbet are presented as more modern than their theories of painting, for the model is revealed to be not the production of an imitation of reality, but a constructed equivalent of the real, a potentially active commentator on the relationship between art and reality.

It is thus that I understand Char's 'open' affirmation: "Complications de la poésie... Simplicité de la peinture...". Char does not desire to posit painting as inferior to poetry; he wishes rather to establish a difference between painting and poetry, without necessarily setting up an aesthetic hierarchy. By means of his topological manoeuvres, he transforms and translates the paintings, and his letter to Christian Zervos locates the essential problem of art in its attitudes to its models. He thus predicates translation as the essence of artistic creation - though translation is inescapably multiform, complex (and dangerous). Like Valéry, Char conceives of simplicity as that which supposes and calls up complexity:²⁶ the work of art always demands, and needs, a supplement. The 'simplicity' of the painting creates the need for the interpretative multiplicity and complexity of the poem, and the complexity of the poem refers back strategically to the alleged simplicity of the painting, which thereby becomes complex. Simplicity is thus presented as potentially containing complexity.

Yet the titles reveal also the anxiety of influence which, as Bloom recognises, involves a certain love for the work of the precursor. What Char wishes to do is to establish a metaphorical specular relationship between the painting and the poem, to inaugurate a relationship of interlocution, to generate a dialogue - and this dialogue must lead to Strife, must even be Strife. Consequently, one might suggest that Char's poetics exemplifies Empedocles's notion of the dialectic between Love and Hate. Empedocles writes:

Cédant à l'action de la Haine toute forme se divise et se disloque tandis que les éléments, disjoints, tendent sous l'action de l'Amour à se confondre, pris d'un mutuel désir.²⁷

When reading Empedocles's fragments, one cannot overlook his systematic strategy of according syntactic priority alternately to Love and to Hate. Char's own theoretical stance on relational poetry would seem, in fact, to develop this strategy, since his attitude to the precursors Courbet and Corot starts from love and admiration of their paintings. As poet, he desires to unite with the precursor but there then operates a revisionary ratio whereby the latecome poet aggresses the painter by separating the model from the painting: Hate (which springs from Love) is directed against the precursor, and Strife is created in order to permit the individuation of the poet as artist.

The poet must thus Incorporate the act of artistic translation - or even the painter - within his text: Strife is maintained within the poem by means of the reference to the name of the painter, while also being resolved through the rhetorical presentation of the precursor-painter and his work as textual functions. 'Courbet: les casseurs de cailloux' articulates an awareness of the political aspect of Courbet's painting, but expresses it through the words of the 'father', thereby personalizing a work which precisely avoids the personal for, as T.J. Clark perceives:

In the Stonebreakers, everything is particular except the two men's faces, and feelings; and they are masked because Courbet saw, in the end, that they were the only things in the scene he did not know or understand.²⁸

Char elects to particularize that which is absent from the painting, yet he (unlike Courbet) has never seen the models - he can see them only as figures, as visual tropes. His resurrection of the models must, then, be a rejection of mimesis, being rather a manifestation of semiosis. The discourse of the father opens with an expression of desire and longing for otherness within which differences may harmoniously co-exist:

Sable, paille ont la vie douce, le vin ne s'y brise pas.

Sand and straw, symbols here of softness and security, form the object of the father's dreaming of a less hostile world which absorbs rather than resists. The connotations of absent softness, a counterpoint to those of present harshness in the second stanza, effect a literalization of the metaphoric expression "avoir la vie douce", whereas "le vin ne s'y brise pas" is clearly metaphoric: thus in this first line we find the poet proffering a language in which literal and metaphoric co-exist and are even fused ("sable" and "paille" are read as both literal and metaphoric). To read this opening (and therefore privileged) line is to recognise that the translation of the painting into the poem - and ultimately, though dangerously so, into the "langage pratique" of the reader²⁹ - is an act of supplemental rhetoric, rather than an act of recuperative transposition.

In an essay on painting and poetry, Marcelin Pleyne writes:

...je dirai qu'une bonne traduction (si tant est qu'il puisse y avoir de bonnes traductions et que ce soit de traduction qu'il s'agisse) implique bien entendu que le traducteur connaisse la langue qu'il traduit, mais plus encore et essentiellement qu'il soit parfaitement maître des virtualités de sa propre langue puisque finalement c'est de sa propre langue, et seulement de sa propre langue qu'il va parler. Qu'est-ce qui se dit de l'art, sous quelque forme que ce soit, si ce n'est du type de rapport que le porteur du discours entretient avec sa propre langue?³⁰

Char's translation would seem to validate Pleyne's thesis, in the sense that his poem takes the painting in order to generate an awareness of the difference (and conflict) between pictorial 'language' and verbal language and a recognition of the way in which poetic language consistently speculates on itself and constitutes itself in the movement between literal and figurative language.

Yet Char's poems are written "sans instruction", the poet knows that he does not fully possess the language of painting and he initially enters into a relationship of strife with the pre-

cursor by miswriting the titles of the paintings, thereby privileging the poet's (verbal) language over that of the painter. However, the catastrophe of translation results in further Strife. The text presents its own figures as fictions: "Le sang bien souffert tombe dans l'anecdote de leur légèreté". The projective discourse of the father articulates an awareness of its own fictional status, thereby differing radically from the painting of Courbet who adheres to an aesthetics of painting as an imitation of reality. However, Char perceives that, as Pierre Dalx asserts: "... la vision de Courbet est plus moderne que sa théorie".³¹ His text subverts the possibility of a univocal reading, challenging reading as a means of possessing or appropriating meaning and consequently revealing, through an act of aggressive translation, the fact that Courbet's painting signifies not through its reference to 'outside' reality but through its being-as-fiction. The textually created figure of the father in Char's poem performs an act of troping, of creating fictions, within the fiction of the poem, itself a translation of the fiction of the painting: Char's text is, one might suggest, a metafiction which fulfils a metacritical function, commenting on the nature of its own commenting on the painting.

One might suspect, then, that the rhetorical strategy of the poem is to trope in order to refuse the apparent realism of the painting and substitute emotional truth for political vision. However, the second stanza returns to the reality of the stonebreakers and constructs an image of sterility, disease and alienation. The waking dream of the first stanza is now perceived as motivated by dissatisfaction with every aspect of the stonebreakers' experience of life - fiction is thus a defence against reality, but this very mechanism is insufficient, since the first two stanzas establish a seemingly irresolvable opposition. Both the fantasy and the reality are described figuratively, but the final stanza moves from the collective "nous" and "on" of stanza two to the particularizing "nous" of the father and son:

Fils, cette nuit, nos travaux de poussière Seront
visibles dans le ciel: Déjà l'huile du plomb
ressuscite.

Through the positioning of the future tense "Seront" at the beginning of the second line, the poet assigns to the father an attitude of implicit revolt - the longing of the first stanza has been metamorphosed into an expression of will. Furthermore, the final stanza radically translates the painting by an effect of shifting out or 'débryage temporel',³² where the phrase "cette nuit" ensures that the 'present' of the father's discourse be constituted as a textual function rather than as an empirically verifiable referential source. Thus Char poetically demonstrates the primacy of praxis over theory (at least in the case of Courbet). The expression "nos travaux de poussière" is both literal and metaphoric in that it refers to the physical work of the stonebreakers and it also implies death (by association with its symbolic use, notably in the Bible). The dust is a terminal point in the process of catastrophe as figured in the poem: stone ("pierre") has been broken down into pebbles ("cailloux"), which themselves are broken down into dust ("poussière"). Yet Char rarely uses images or symbols in a monovalent way, and another culturally determined symbolic value of dust reveals that the catastrophe of translation is not simply destructive but is a form of creation - dust, from Genesis onwards, symbolizes the creative force. We thus return to Bloom's notion of catastrophe-creation as a defence, but the final line of the poem launches a creative attack on the painting, exploiting an effect of shifting in or 'embrayage temporel'³³ ("Déjà") which, later in the text, presumes the future transformation of the stonebreakers' work forecast earlier for "cette nuit". A microcosmic synecdoche of the poem, the last line is an exemplar of Char's catastrophe-creation. The grammar is ambiguous, offering two possible meanings: (i) Already oil returns to life from lead; (ii) The oil of the lead is already returning to life. Both meanings express belief in some future and better state of fertility and prosperity, but significantly the articulation of this hope maintains inscribed within it the sign of present heaviness and sterility ("plomb"). Through its juxtaposition of desirable and undesirable, the final line enacts a closure of the poem by linking the dream and the real worlds in the expression of hope, but its ambiguity functions as a form of anti-closure, in that it withholds the possibility of an answer to the questions implicitly posed in the text. There is no means of deciding which of the meanings has primacy, of determining whether the oil is returning

to life from a state other than itself (lead) or whether it is the oil contained within the lead which is being resurrected. The lead is both a (past and temporary) destination and an original origin of the oil: as so often in Char's thinking, the concept of the origin is examined poetically - and is presented as never solely natal. The line signifies beyond the contextual determination of the father's meditation on his existence as a stonebreaker; it is a troping of the result of the catastrophe of translation which abolishes the painting as (pictorial) figure in order to resurrect it through the act of translating it into verbal language. Through a process of metonymic association, "l'hulle" is read as the painting and "le plomb" as writing; the poem thus resurrects not only the model but also the painting itself, which can be read - and seen - creatively only after it has been destroyed as pure figure.

In 'Une Italienne de Corot', Char's catastrophe-creation is even more radically presented as a tropological manifesto of relational poetry. There is no painting by Corot called simply 'Une Italienne' and none of his paintings which contain the referential marker 'Italienne' in their titles offers visual information which could generate the totality of the poem; Char's title thus furnishes the illusion of a reference, ensuring that the reading of the text be based on an illusion, on an absence. As I have suggested elsewhere,³⁴ the inspirational source of the poem is probably Moissonneuse tenant une faucille (though this supplying of an origin is necessarily speculative). The suppression of the/a locatable title of Corot's painting in the title of the poem is a conscious strategy on the part of the poet which establishes the autonomy of the poem, while simultaneously implying an intertextual relationship with the painting which is grounded in alienation - abolition of the source must precede the translation into poetry. In order to achieve individuation, the poet must distance himself from the work of his precursor; only then can he resurrect the model, the painting, and even the painter (as painter). The discourse of the 'Italienne' offers a description which, "like all literary discourse, is a verbal detour so contrived that the reader understands something else than the object ostensibly represented".³⁵

The first stanza locates the awareness of differences as a defining characteristic of the girl's state - she articulates a

feeling that she is separated from the landscape in which she has been placed by Corot. Furthermore, there is a refusal to justify the (non-) title given by Char to Corot's painting, in that the discourse which constitutes the poem is not even a translation into the idiolect of a constructed object, but is an unmistakably Charrian discourse, marked by his "obsession de la moisson",³⁶ which withholds (and indeed suppresses) all allusions to the specificity of this, or any, Italian girl. The reader cannot but read the poem as an interpretative discourse, rather than as a mimetic representation of the canvas, and submit to the authority of the poet who has supplanted the painter. Translation is thus not only appropriation but substitution - and yet the programmatic title of the poem feigns the recognition of a source, albeit an illusory one. If the poem signifies autonomously, why the title, why the locating of an apparently unnecessary and inappropriate source? An answer is offered figuratively in the second stanza: "A moissonner des tiges, on se plie, on raisonne l'ignoré". Harvesting, or gathering in, as always in Char's work, functions both literally and symbolically: the act of bending is equated grammatically with that of studying rationally that which is unknown and therefore cannot be logically studied. Through harvesting, then, the unknown can be brought within the cognitive field of Man - just as the unlocatable painting is 'gathered into' the poem, where it may form the object of a poetic and transformatory meditation. The title of the painting is 'translated out' and the importance of the model as figure is 'translated in': these strategies of destructive and creative translation serve to bring into question the programmatic function of titles and thereby establish a consideration of relativity within the work of art. Yet the poem's title itself sets up an intertextual and an interartistic relationship: Char's title programmes the reading of his text, but through its aggressive relationship with Corot's title, it also reveals that titles are often marginal, are supplements and subversions of the works they dominate.

Furthermore, the relationship between Char's text and its title demonstrates that Char realizes that "there are no texts, but only relationships between texts"³⁷; by simultaneously recognising and refusing the inspirational source of his poem, Char enacts the strong (and therefore destructive) anxiety of

Influence, rendering the natal origin absent (unknown) in order to resurrect it, without perhaps recuperating it. The model affirms in stanza two: "Je suis à qui m'assaille, je cède au poids furieux". Like the model of the painting, herself a model for reading, the reader must admit that he is the prey of two aggressors: the present poem and the absent painting. Yet the admission in the 'énonciation' would seem to suggest that the "italienne" must yield to the law of the strongest, to the "poids furieux" or "fureur" of poetry. The resurrection by the poet of the model is thus an act of aggressive appropriation, though an "inversion bénigne"³⁸ of the 'killing' of the model by the painter - and all processes of inversion in art are inescapably relational acts which incorporate the precursor in order to reject the notion that the latecome artist is merely the natural 'child' or successor of his 'father'.

In the final stanza, we find an explicit articulation of the relational nature of Char's work:

Une haie d'érables se rabat chez un peintre qui
l'ébranche sur la paix de sa toile.
C'est un familier des fermes pauvres,
Affable et chagrin comme un scarabée.

The painter has aggressively pruned the hedge of maples which imposed itself upon his vision in order to create the meditative (and questioning) peace of his canvas - and the present tense in the poem indicates that this process of the manipulation of reality continues as the model speculates discursively on her own transformation. Significantly, the onomastic reference to the painter in the title which affords a historical anchoring and thus the illusion of an external referent is replaced by the inscription into the poem's text of the painter as figure, as himself a model. The discourse of the "italienne" recuperates the painter by troping him and comparing him to a scarab which is reborn from its own decomposition: the painter is perceived as guaranteeing rebirth in the continuous cycle of Art by means of his manipulation of reality which necessitates his following the fate of the model and being killed in order to be resurrected by the textual manipulation of the painting. Char's relational poem thus demonstrates that Art is both interpretative and perfor-

mative, and the language of the text enacts the mobility of existence which is paradoxically, contained within (and, indeed, is) the peace of the work of art. The poem generates a meditation which goes beyond the parameters which it seems to establish in the title, and the functioning of the language within the text creates a dialectic between literal and figurative discourse: one might consequently suggest that Char's poem serves simultaneously to distance the reader from the individuality of a canvas perceived as anecdotal and to validate Corot's work (of which Molssonneuse tenant une faucille is a paradigm) as generative rather than descriptive.

In both poems, pictorial visibility is presented not as an originary origin, but as the result of a future transformation - and the textual functioning of these relational poems determines that it is the reader-speculator who will be the site of this metamorphosis. The poet commits himself to voluntary blindness by focussing essentially on the models, since it is only by blinding himself to the painting as 'événement' that he can supplant the precursor by the act of translating the painting into the poetic discourse of the model. Yet the very act of voluntary self-blinding is a recognition of the potential authority of the painting which must be refused if the poem is to assert its own autonomy and authority. The strategy of translation employed by Char is one of splitting, whereby the model is separated from the pictorial enclosure imposed by the painter and the 'unpaintable' discourse of the model is translated into verbal language.

Char's mode of translation is clearly catastrophic in that he refuses both the authority and the form of the pre-texts and also the power of the precursor-artist to exert a restrictive or formative influence on him. The poems witness to Char's desire to explore the relational aspect of art which, for him, exists only as a network of intertextual and interartistic references. The programmatic and perlocutionary force of their titles imposes on the reader the necessity to speculate in an intertextual mode and to transfer the weight of interpretative creativity from the artist to the reader-speculator. Metapoetic texts, Char's poems function as poems, but also comment on the functioning of every poetic text, revealing that the reader is simultaneously receptor

and sender, victim and predator. The poems act as much as they signify, and the reader, become a speculator, has to recognise that every reading, like every interpretation, is a creative act which transforms the absence of a locatable reference into the presence of a created reference - or, more accurately, of a reference which has yet to be fully created and which can be created only in the moment of reading. We may thus perceive in Char's relational poetry both an awareness that the work of art can exist only in its relation with other works (be they poetic, visual - or even musical) and a recognition that the poetic text is constituted as loss and as rejection of precursors and can be rendered present only in the nuptial Presence afforded by the reader in the moment of reading. When the reader realizes that translation is an aggressive mode of transposition, is catastrophe-creation, the illusion of relativity in art is transformed - through the fictions created by the poem - into a reality: relations are not, in fact, established authoritatively within the poem, but are created speculatively by the reader in his dialectical meditation on named (and unnamed) sources which are thereby translated into destinations.

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NOTES

1. René Char, 'Feuillets d'Hypnos', no. 31, Fureur et mystère (Gallimard, 1962), pp. 98-99.
2. 'Feuillets d'Hypnos', no. 151, *ibid.* p. 131.
3. The phrase "la conversation souveraine" is the title both of an essay and of a section in René Char, Recherche de la base et du sommet (Gallimard, 1965), pp. 79 and 93. This section of Recherche is devoted to Char's comments and meditations on artists whom he has known or who have influenced him.
4. René Char, 'Héraclite d'Ephèse', *ibid.*, p. 91.
5. René Char, Le marteau sans maître (José Corti, 1970), pp. 53-54.
6. René Char, Commune présence (Gallimard, 1964), p. 199. See also Dehors la nuit est gouvernée (GLM, 1938), unpaginated, and Dehors la nuit est gouvernée précédé par Placard pour un chemin des écoliers (GLM, 1949), p. 54, for differently punctuated versions.
7. Commune présence, pp. 197-198. See also Dehors la nuit est gouvernée, unpaginated, and Dehors la nuit est gouvernée précédé par Placard pour un chemin des écoliers, p. 53, for differently punctuated versions. The first version also contains the line "Du vice à souler une cave", which is omitted in later versions.
8. The poems were first published in Cahiers d'art, 13^e année, nos. 3-10 (1938), pp. 229-230.
9. Autograph letter to Christian Zervos, Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet, Fonds René Char-Yvonne Zervos, no. 83: AE.IV.7 bis.
10. 'Feuillets d'Hypnos', no. 114, Fureur et mystère, p. 119.
11. Yves Battistini, Trois présocratiques (Gallimard, 1968), p. 42 (fragment no. 92). Battistini's book is dedicated to Char.

12. See, for instance, the following fragments in the Battistini translation: "Les contraires s'accordent, la discordance crée la plus belle harmonie: le devenir tout entier est une lutte" (no. 9, p. 30); "Le combat est père et roi suprême de toutes choses" (no. 10, p.31).

13. See the following fragment in the Battistini translation:
"...la Haine, force extérieure, destructrice, égale en poids
à chacun d'eux
(the elements)
et l'Amour, force intérieure, égal en longueur et en largeur
à leur être par lui réuni..." (no. 17, p. 158).

14. See the following fragment in the Battistini translation:
"...car l'Amour et la Haine se succèdent selon les cycles réglés
par l'ample pacte..." (no. 30, p. 164).

15. Le marteau sans maître, p. 11. Char follows the Battistini translation for the Heraclitus fragment, but offers a slightly different version of the Empedocles fragment, thereby reasserting the creative power of (mis)translation. Battistini translates the fragment thus: "J'ai pleuré, j'ai sangloté à la vue de cet insolite pays" (no. 118, p. 181).

16. Harold Bloom, A map of misreading (OUP, 1980), p.10.

17. Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis terminable and interminable', Standard Edition, vol. 23, pp. 245-246.

18. Harold Bloom, 'Freud's Concepts of Defense and the Poetic Will', in Joseph H. Smith (ed), The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will (Psychiatry and the Humanities, vol. 4, New Haven, 1980), p.20.

19. See E.A. Nida and C. Taber, The Theory and Poetics of Translation (Brill, Leyden, 1974).

20. Gabriel Bauret, 'La peinture et le commentaire: le métalangage du tableau', Littérature, no. 27 (oct. 1977), p. 34.

21. See Dali's response to E. Tériade's questions about chance, spontaneity and the absence of the model in 'Emancipation de la peinture', Minotaure, vols. 3-4 (1933), p.18.

22. Le marteau sans maître, p.44.

23. For Bloom's definitions, see The Anxiety of Influence (OUP, 1975), pp. 15-16, 141.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

25. I use the term "événementiel" in the sense proposed by Jean-François Lyotard in Discours, Figure (Klincksieck, 1978). Interestingly, Lyotard's theory of influence is analogous to that of Bloom. He writes of Cézanne: "Léonard permet de comprendre Cézanne parce qu'il est l'écriture que ce dernier rencontre et tâche de surmonter. La relation est ici celle de la censure avec le désir: l'ordre renaissant fait peser sur le jeu plastique des contraintes que celui-ci va transgresser" (p. 164).

26. See Paul Valéry, 'Autour de Corot', Oeuvres, t. II (Pléiade, 1960), p. 1310.

27. Fragment 21, Trois présocratiques, p. 160.

28. T.J. Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second Empire (Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 74.

29. See André Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme (Gallimard, 1975): "Pour moi, la plus forte (image) est celle qui présente le degré d'arbitraire le plus élevé, je ne le cache pas; celle qu'on met le plus longtemps à traduire en langage pratique..." (p. 52).

30. Marcelin Pleynet, 'Peinture et poésie: la leçon de Robert Motherwell', Art et Littérature (Seuil, 1977), pp. 280-282. Pleynet's parenthetical questioning of the value and the possibility of translation is particularly important, since it highlights the problematics of discoursing on painting and thereby implicitly suggests that to write or talk about painting is to appropriate aggressively the visual image. Char's attitude to translation in his painting-poems differs interestingly from Pleynet's in that his texts contain a self-reflexive consideration of their own rhetorical functioning, but they also expose - in the pre-written and in the written stages - a meditation on the functioning of the pre-texts (which are also pretexts).

31. Pierre Daix, 'Structures de l'art d'imitation et structures de l'art moderne', Nouvelle critique et art moderne (Seuil, 1968), p. 116.

32. I use the term following the definition by A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés In Sémiotique: dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage (Hachette, 1979), p. 81.

33. See the Greimas and Courtés definition In Sémiotique (p. 119).

34. See my Ph.D. thesis 'The evolution of the poetry of René Char: 1928-1945' (Edinburgh University, 1982), and 'Du tableau au texte: Courbet, Corot, Char', not yet published.

35. Michael Riffaterre, 'Descriptive Imagery', Yale French Studies, no. 61 (1981), p. 125.

36. René Char, 'A une sérénité crispée', Recherche de la base et du sommet, p. 126.

37. Harold Bloom, A map of misreading, p. 3.

38. I use the concept of "inversion bénigne" following Michel Tournier's notion as proposed In Le Roi des Aulnes (Gallimard, 1970) and Gilles et Jeanne (Gallimard, 1983).