



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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This issue of *Hyperion* is dedicated to

ELIO PETRI



29 January 1929 – 10 November 1982

<http://eliopetri.net>

Thought to the Purpose

Criticism is nothing, but this nothingness is precisely that in which the literary work, silent and invisible, allows itself to be what it is: radiance and discourse, affirmation and presence, speaking seemingly about itself, without faltering, in this void of great quality that it is critical intervention's mission to produce. Critical discourse is this space of resonance within which the unspoken, indefinite reality of the work is momentarily transformed and circumscribed into words. And as such, due to the fact that it claims modestly and obstinately to be nothing, criticism ceases being distinguished from the creative discourse of which it would be the necessary actualization or, metaphorically speaking, the epiphany.

Maurice Blanchot, "What is the Purpose of Criticism"
Lautréamont and Sade

The critic develops a crisis in the work, in its language, in the history of works and language, to provoke a crisis of conscience in the reader/viewer as well as in the filmmaker. In order to avoid being an end in itself, however, shouldn't the critical process aim at what might be called an essential result, even given the prospects of so many other deeper crises, and thus even more essential? I say yes, I think it must. And I consider the critic's work sterile and un-creative if he lacks the drive to explore and live within the crisis of the work and of language, having already experienced the crises of his analytical tools, of his own criteria and of his own status. It seems clear to me that all the crises around these subjects start off separately but soon come together in the ongoing general and enduring crisis of culture and society. It is that crisis we mustn't forget if we are to get essential results for mankind out of our work as critics and creators.

Elio Petri, *Writings on Cinema & Life*

Char with van Gogh



Window in the studio, 1889. Brush and oils, black chalk on pink laid paper, 62 x 47.6 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Stichting) F 1.528, JH1807



René Char, Paris, 1980. Photo by Willy Ronis

Introduction by Stuart Kendall

In 1983, René Char became the first living French poet to see his work published in Gallimard's prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. The poet edited the volume himself, rather deliberately assembling his collected, if not exactly complete, works. The edition served to consecrate his oeuvre, but it did not close it, for he continued to write.

Two years later, he published a new collection of poems, *Les Voisinages de van Gogh* (The Vicinities of van Gogh). The poems from the second half of the collection were first published in the *Nouvelle revue française*.¹ Other poems appeared in *Le Débat* in March 1985. Gallimard published the book as a whole in May. The first edition of the book included the final piece, “The Vicinities of van Gogh,” as an insert rather than as one of the texts, but it was integrated into the book proper for the second and subsequent editions.

Situated beyond the *oeuvres complètes*, these poems participate in a unique genre of *belles-lettres*: writings produced *after* the writer’s collected work has been completed. These are works written in the shadow of a lifetime and also, inevitably, in the shadow of its end. They are necessarily nostalgic but also light and unencumbered, urgent but without fanfare. A casual reader might take them in at a glance, passing too quickly over their carefully studied and reflective terrain.

Jean Baudrillard began his *Cool Memories* with a related observation: “This is where the rest of life begins. But the rest is what is given to you as something extra, and there is a charm and a particular freedom about letting just anything come along, with the grace — or ennui — of a later destiny.”² Lightness and depth, in other words: a range of effects shaped by a lifetime’s attention to detail.

Char’s title — *The Vicinities of van Gogh* — like the poems themselves, is both overloaded and subtle. These *Vicinities* are physical, psychological, and aesthetic at once. Physically, they are the painter’s haunts in and around the town of St. Rémy-de-Provence, where van Gogh lived from May 1889 to May 1890, a town Char knew in his youth and revisited in the 1980s, on an occasion that produced these poems. Psychologically and aesthetically though, these poems are records of a vision shared, of Char’s attempt to see the landscape and the things of St. Rémy-de-Provence through van Gogh’s eyes, through the eyes, that is, of this painter who, as Antonin Artaud put it, “in his whole life, only cooked one of his hands and did

¹ *Nouvelle revue française* n° 377 (June 1984). See “Variants” for alternate original versions of two poems from this initial publication.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories*, tr. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1990) 3.

nothing more, for the rest, than once cut his left ear.”³ The poet lets his long meditation on the painter’s images, on his drawings in particular, be his guide to the details and atmosphere of a place that the poet already knows well. This poetry is not based on paintings nor even loosely inspired by specific paintings. The poet is pursuing his own path but under the influence of the painter’s vision, work and, inevitably, fevered life. Char is not trying to be van Gogh, rather merely to be with him, to walk alongside his experiences and his sense of a place in Provence.

These late poems were not the first in which Char endeavored to see through the frame of a painter’s work. He had spent much of his life in the company of visual artists. Some of his closest friends were painters — Georges Braque, Nicholas de Stael, Alberto Giacometti, Picasso — and he wrote about them often, occasionally at length, relatively speaking. Many of them illustrated his work. Char’s publications, like many small-press publications in his day, were often accompanied by drawings, lithographs, or other images from one or another of his famous artist friends. The first edition of *The Vicinities of van Gogh* was accompanied by a gouache by Alexandre Galpérine. Char’s poetry is thus consistently visual in several senses: it is a poetry of images and symbols, of colors, shapes and textures, but it is also a poetry written alongside visual art and accompanied by it.

These poems are situated within a poetic oeuvre awash in painting, now under the more direct aegis of van Gogh, but they are not solely devoted to his vision. Char’s beloved Georges de la Tour appears alongside the Dutchman in “Boundary-Stone”, and “Wild Berth” — a series of Surrealist images and aphorisms — is set in L’Estaque, the seaside city celebrated by Cézanne and Char’s friend, Georges Braque. The majority of the poems, though, suggest the places and spaces, the objects and energies of the Provence painted by Vincent van Gogh, in particular the city of St. Rémy and its environs.

³ Antonin Artaud, “Van Gogh Le Suicidé de la Société” in Artaud, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, Quarto, 2004) 1439.

St. Rémy-de-Provence is named for St. Remigius (437-533), who, as Bishop of Reims, baptized Clovis, King of the Franks, and thereby contributed to the Christianization of Europe. But the town has earlier roots as well. In the fourth century before the common era, a Celtic settlement centered on a spring, just south of the city, where the Alpilles begin to rise. A shrine there honored the god Glanis, the shining one. The name was Hellenized as Glanon and then Romanized as Glanum, thriving at the time of Augustus. The Romans erected an elaborate city there with paved streets, public baths, an impressive triumphal arch and a cenotaph. Abandoned in the third century, Glanum was not unearthed until 1921, which is to say, not until Char's lifetime. The first poem in the present collection references the landscape around the ancient city.

St. Rémy proper is situated one kilometer north of Glanum, with Saint-Paul de Mausole, the asylum where van Gogh sought to recover himself, in between. A small city, St. Rémy has Roman roots and the architectural and cultural features of a city that has been at the crossroads of Europe for two thousand years: Avignon is just twelve kilometers to the North. During the Renaissance, St. Rémy was home to Michel de Nostradamus, an apothecary and doctor as well as an astrologist and prophet, born there in 1503. But it is perhaps best known now in connection with van Gogh, who lived there from May 1889 to May 1890, in what would be the penultimate year of his life.

Van Gogh's St. Rémy was centered at Saint-Paul de Mausole, the asylum where he had voluntarily interned himself after ablating his earlobe in Arles. Van Gogh lived in a small room but roamed the grounds and the countryside widely. His St. Rémy was a place of olive and cypress trees, of lilacs and irises, of wheat fields blazing in Provençal light, of the jutting stones of the Alpilles and of starry night. This is the St. Rémy that Char saw and it is the St. Rémy that attracts visitors today. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault observed that van Gogh, "who did not want to ask 'permission from doctors to paint pictures', knew quite well that his

work and his madness were incompatible.”⁴ But van Gogh’s audience has never been so certain: the tragic aura and implication of madness haunts his life and works. St. Rémy is the site of his attempted recovery from the incident at Arles and as such it is the site of tortured interregnum between Arles and the artist’s final catastrophic confrontation with himself, a year later, in Auvers-sur-Oise, outside of Paris.

Char begins his presentation piece for these works, now included among them as the final text, with a powerfully frank self-assessment: “Confronting my little life alongside van Gogh I’ve always felt like nothing.” For Char and, I suspect, for all of us, there are artists and then there are artists. Char asks: “From what fire and what paradise did Vincent van Gogh arise?” And then he walks in his footsteps. Francis Bacon did something similar — and with related materials — in his series of studies for a portrait of van Gogh from 1957. Those paintings took their cue from van Gogh’s self-portrait on the road to Tarascon from 1888 (now destroyed). In each case, the artist and the poet measure themselves against the expressive works of the acknowledged master, van Gogh, a master whose work and life pitched him over the edge of madness.

Though gathered in a specific corner of the region, these poems of light and shade are also, and perhaps first and foremost, poems of Provence. They celebrate the land, the sea, and the sun, the fields, trees, flowers, birds and beasts. They are songs from the history of a storied land, gathered around one of its most burning stories (that of van Gogh). These songs are sung by the foremost twentieth century poet of Provence, René Char, at the end of a life spent singing similar songs. Having recently assembled his collected works, it is unsurprising that the poet should return to the land that had been his home and his inspiration, that he might rework familiar themes and images, even spaces of imagination. In the poem “Beneath a Grasping Wind”, for example, he recalls Aerea, a town described by Pliny the Younger as being in the region of Gaul that is now known as the Vaucluse. Yet no trace of this town has survived in our day: it has become a phantasm of the imagination. Char had previously written of it in the mid-1960s, in a poem entitled

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988) 287.

“At the Gateways of Aerea,” included in his collection *Retour Amont* (Returning Upland).⁵ These layers of history thus include the history of the imagination and the history of the poet’s own imagination alongside the details of incident and environment.

It is important to remember that René Char’s poetic imagination was shaped as much by Nietzsche and Heraclitus as it was by Arthur Rimbaud. Char’s vision was a tragic vision and an exacting philosophical one. Here of course the poet’s tragic vision reads as an appropriate response to age and experience, evidence of a stoic acceptance of imminent fate. “What promises didn’t you deliver, beautiful Life!” “In the end,” he writes, “the earth won’t hesitate over human destiny.” In the vein of Heraclitus, he observes: “The past is without pride. Rivers have no greater affinity than in constraint.” These facts shape the details of his verse, its thematic content and the meaning that lingers for us.

Are these works “late works” in Theodor Adorno’s sense of this phrase? In his essay “Beethoven’s Late Style,” Adorno proposed a stylistic category of “late work” to express a style in which subjectivity and objectivity have become disjointed and inorganic. For Adorno, such works are the catastrophes of the history of art, demonstrating the distance between individual experience and the objective world. In some sense, almost all of René Char’s greatest works situated themselves within this distance. Char is the poet of *Fureur et mystère* (Fury and Mystery, 1948). His works evoke and dwell in a world whose final meaning is always ambiguous and out of reach. I will leave it to the reader to determine whether the present collection falls into this category.

Réne Char died of a heart attack on 19 February 1988. His final collection of poetry, *Eloge d’une Soupçonnée* (In Praise of the Suspect), was published posthumously, in May of that year.

⁵ Char, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1995) 425. For an English translation, see René Char, *The Brittle Age and Returning Upland*, tr. Gustaf Sobin (Denver, CO: Counterpath Press, 2009) 105.

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The Vicinities of van Gogh



Vincent van Gogh, *Undergrowth with Two Figures*, 1890.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 100.5. Cincinnati Art Museum, USA. JH2041 [F773]

René Char

Tr. by Stuart Kendall

Before Glanum

Among the violent star-bursts, our familiars, one that cries out against us, then dies, others that shine through an impatient evening, then resist, as if nothing had passed between us and them. Will they always be hanging in the Way that covers us, that suffocates us?

The frightening familiarity of celestial matters, with their sparkling entourage, bending down to the blush of human beings — those yet to be formed, so far from being filed away, since the desires of divine fairs have revealed their potential misfortunes to them. Thirsty, the closest moon will show itself in the precise instant of our living waters.

Complete the portrait of so much nullity, of crimes cleaving nausea, void and expectation, suspended in the bit of air that remains. We are not the stuff of doubt before the sandy ritual left on the worn bank of Saints.

Green Stones

Sleeping through life, awakened by life, knowing death leaves us destitute, spirit worn, dead tired.

Don't speak, don't respond that the day's contributions are much too weak in us. You already said as much on the threshold of our lodging, late of Lethe.

A spark burned my leather coat. What can I do about it? Ashes and leather!

"Move," it says, "don't grieve a blossoming coat."

The imprecision in the air needs, it too, to be lived. Like seeding words.