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Weapons of Choice: Pain and Violence in the Ecological Poetics of René Char and John Thompson

by Adam Beardsworth

As a figure of impending catastrophe, the contemporary ecological crisis has evoked a coextensive crisis of representation. In contemporary discourses of green philosophy and deep ecology, language is seen as both impediment and resource in the struggle to define a less destructive relationship with the natural world. While these discourses often view language as a source of alienation that has separated humans from natural origins, they also consider the cultivation of a more irenic language a means of overcoming the estrangement caused by the nature/culture dichotomy. This desire to return to natural origins through poetic language reveals a paradox at the heart of deep ecological thinking. If language, and its attendant forms of symbolic representation, is indeed a source of rupture that initiates a movement from the natural into a cultural and political order, then reclaiming a natural sphere through language, the source of exile, is impossible. Instead, the incommensurable distance between the natural world and our desire to reclaim it symbolically is one predicated upon a profound and irreconcilable rupture.

It is this space of rupture that the French poet René Char and the Canadian poet John Thompson identify as the starting point for an ecological poetics. The relationship between Thompson and Char is one of student and subject; Thompson completed his PhD dissertation on the work of Char in 1966, wherein he identified Char as a poet invested in exploring the limits of the natural world as a source of ontological presence. The influence of Char's sparse and fragmentary images of a discordant Nature, one that conjures a sense of homelessness and exile in a politically and psychologically turbulent twentieth century, is visible in Thompson's own slim body of work. Indeed the mark of Char's style in Thompson's poetry indicates that Thompson was likely more influenced by the concerns of mid-twentieth century continental poetry and philosophy than by the works of his immediate peers. These concerns can be traced from Thompson back through the work of Char by examining the violent and disruptive treatment of nature in the works of both poets. While images of the envi-

ronment figure prominently in their respective aesthetics, neither uses those images to evoke a nostalgic desire for harmonious integration with Nature. Instead, by crafting images of an anarchic natural world, Char and Thompson each position Nature as a source of physical suffering, an experience conveyed by a disruptive and paratactic style that emphasizes a fractured, rather than holistic, relationship with the environment. Paradoxically, for these poets the experience of pain and dislocation evoked by their work conjures a sense of ontological certainty rather than alienation from the natural world. Their intensification of violence is an attempt to figure the somatic experience of pain, however ephemeral, as a presence that transcends linguistic and symbolic representation. The emphasis on pain in their works configures the poetic artifact not as a use of language, but as a materialization of language as violent event. In short, the poem-as-violent-object becomes the weapon of choice for Char and Thompson in the struggle to adequately represent the human position within the natural world. By combining images of a stark and violent elemental being with a nonlinear and disruptive poetic style, these poets gesture towards a primeval state anterior to language. As such, they posit the return to bare life as a violent sundering of everyday reality rather than as a harmonious reintegration with the Nature.

Contemporary ecocriticism, as a mode of discourse, has frequently sought a means of bridging the socially constructed gap between the human world of language and representation, and a primal natural space. The groundbreaking work of scholars such as Jonathan Bate, Lawrence Buell, Terry Gifford, and Max Oelschlager has iterated the connection between the wilderness and poetic language, and framed that connection as the means for reestablishing the foundational bond between Nature and the destructive human world. According to Buell, imaginative works are a vital mode of praxis that may help increase human engagement with ecological crises:

> acts of environmental imagination, whatever anyone thinks to the contrary, potentially register and energize at least four kinds of engagement with the world. They may connect readers vicariously with others' experience, suffering, pain: that of nonhumans as well as humans. They may reconnect readers with places they have been and send them where they would otherwise never physically go. They may direct thought towards alternative futures. And they may affect one's caring for the physical world. (*Writing for an Endangered World* 2)

These four kinds of energy are particularly evident in environmental philosophies informed by the principles of deep ecology. Developed by Arne Naess in the 1970s, deep ecology "identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere" (Garrard 24). While the nuances of contemporary ecocriticism are far too varied to reduce to a singular desire for return to a monistic ecosphere, several prominent critics have nevertheless cited poetic language as a possible source for the cultivation of a more holistic connection to nature. As Jonathan Bate argues, borrowing a line from the nineteenth-century poet John Clare, in the face of ecological crises, "if there is an ecological criticism, the 'language that is ever green' must be reclaimed" (170). Buell, in similar terms, laments realism's passing out of fashion as a sign of contemporary disdain for materialist thought: "[a]ll major strains of contemporary literary theory have marginalized literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from tactical reality" ("Representing the Environment" 178). Overlooking "tactical reality" is tantamount to ignoring the grim and often violent truths present in ecological crises, a fact that leaves "acts of environmental imagination" impotent in the fight for progressive environmental thinking. Terry Gifford argues along similar lines; while acknowledging that any reference to nature in poetry "will implicitly or explicitly express a notion of nature that relates to culturally developed assumptions about metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, and status," he opposes this "social construction of nature" to a "personal notion of nature," where "The poem is a site where writer and reader negotiate the dialectic of personal and social meanings" (176). As William Howarth notes, "[e]cocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through eroded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity" (163).

Each of these critics holds a common conviction that aesthetic acts can also be political acts in the struggle to revitalize ecological discourse. As such, they seek a language freed from the "eroded streams of information," theoretical, cultural, ideological or otherwise, which compromise the clarity of the language of Nature. The poetry of Char and Thompson shares this deep ecological desire to transcend the cultural construction of the ecosphere, and the implied logic of domination that frequently accompa-

nies such constructions. However, in their works the path to a more authentic and organic natural language is one that, paradoxically, gestures towards increased linguistic disruption and violence. Their poetry conveys a desire to reconstitute the natural as an anarchic space, one of hostility and violence that frequently contradicts the myth of harmonious return. In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek interrogates the problem of such utopian longing:

> What lies at the end of this road is the ecological utopia of humanity in its entirety repaying its debt to Nature for all its past exploitation. In effect, is not the idea of "recycling" part of the same pattern as that of restitution for past injustices? The underlying utopian notion is the same: the system which emerged through violence should repay its debt in order to regain an ethico-ecological balance. The ideal of "recycling" involves the utopia of a self-enclosed circle in which all waste, all useless remainder, is sublated: nothing gets lost, all trash is re-used. It is at this level that one should make the shift from the circle to the ellipse: already in nature itself, there is no circle of total recycling, there is an un-usable waste. (35)

It is this idea of restitution, so visible in deep ecological poetics, that is absent from the poetry of Char and Thompson. Reluctant to envision the ecological in utopian terms, their work instead embraces nature as a space of imbalance, change, hostility, and indifference. As such, it offers a more radical stance towards the ecological: rather than seeking to find a language capable of bridging the gap between symbolization and ecological reality, as Buell posits, their work embraces the violence of that gap, and the fundamental estrangement that it produces, as a primary condition of experience. For both poets, the issue "is not to overcome some mind/nature dualism through a more 'natural' kind of language, but to intensify the very 'discontinuity' and interruption in being which the 'human relation', as it is borne in language, poses and is posed by" (Clark 135).

Char emphasizes this tendency towards disruption in statements of poetic practice. For instance, he argues that genuine poetic articulation is undermined by a dialectic of desire and loss: "[b]ecause what we are seeking [as poets] was not discoverable by many, because the life of the mind, a single-strand life, contrary to that of the heart, is only fascinated in a poetic temptation by an unapproachable object which shatters in fragments when, having overcome the distance, we are about to grasp it" (qtd. in Caws 17).

For Char, then, attempting to attain harmony through the poetic act inevitably leads to failure at the point of commensuration. The "unap-

proachable object" mirrors Lacan's objet petit a, or the unconscious source of desire, a source that can never fully convert itself into a physical object. Harmony in nature, as an object of desire, therefore remains out of grasp, always relegated to the unconscious. It is the lost trace of a pure elemental reality, that which remains after the birth of the symbolic order of art, language, and other forms of representation. The experience of the violent fissure between desire and reality is what Char's poetry attempts to convey. This dialectic of desire and loss is a distinct characteristic of Char's poetics, one that appears to endure over the course of his long career. In the early poem "Chain" from his surrealist-associated collection *The Hammer With No Master* (1934), for example, the poet envisions organic processes of renewal and decay as marked by a tension between a fundamental absence and the fragile experience of presence within a primal world. The poem's suggestive title evokes the notion of being as a synchronous chain; however, the image of the chain also suggests that individuals are held captive within the experience of being:

> The great pyre of alliances
> Beneath the spiral sky of failure
> In the rotted boat it is winter
> From solid companions to liquid partners
> Deathbeds below the crust
> In the earth's vacant depths
> The arcs forge a new number of wings
> The bright tillage worships the sodden healers
> On the straw of fatalists
> The lighted star-foam flows
> There is no absence that cannot be replaced.
>
> (7)

The physical world described by the poem is one crippled by violence and decay. Char's image of a burning chain of "alliances" posits existence as at once restrictive and destructive, while the "failure" of the sky evokes a failure of metaphysics, an inability to find a truer source of being that transcends the inherent violence of the physical world. For Char, the condition of being is contingent upon a fundamental anxiety about the potential for violence enacted against the self by the external world. The individual is always hampered by "vacant depths," by the absence that desire wishes to fulfill but that can never be fully satiated. Aware that there is continual danger lurking in the "deathbeds" below the surface, Char posits the condition of being in Nature as one of both anxiety and dissatisfaction, where a frag-

ile presence is predicated upon a strange paradox in which individuals desire an insatiable truth that can be retrieved only on the hither side of being. For Char, therefore, the fundamental condition of existence is the precarious position between an insufficient presence and a sense of loss that is at once threatening and alluring. Even though "The airs forge a new number of wings / The bright tillage worships the sodden healers," there is ultimately "no absence that cannot be replaced" (7), or no truth that cannot be reconstructed, and thus mediated, by symbolic representation. If absence underlies the frail presence of being then the anxiety and discomfort that it causes fuels the compulsive search for a presence to fill the void. Profound melancholy results from the understanding that the quest to fill the void is doomed to fail, and that absence will always be replaced by absence.

The tension between presence and absence evoked in the poem highlights one of Char's central poetic concerns: the inability of language to fully convey a material presence. His work recognizes that the naming of an object displaces the object itself and replaces it with a linguistic signifier. As Maurice Blanchot writes, this means that for Char "[t]he poem is never present. It is always just short of presence, or just beyond. It escapes us because it is our absence rather than our presence and because it begins by making emptiness, and takes things from themselves, and substitutes endlessly what cannot be shown for what it shows, what cannot be said for what it says" (*Work of Fire* 103). In other words, for Char the poem attempts to make present a fundamental absence that it cannot materialize linguistically and symbolically. While it desires pure presence, that presence is eternally beyond the grasp of representation. In Char's work, this struggle for presence is both violent and natural, as conveyed through his language of organic renewal and rupture. At the same time, it is a violence exacted against the self, one that forces the individual to confront an intrinsically disruptive relationship with the natural world where the desire to attain or express a relationship of presence within the ecological world remains always just out of reach, and the attempt to obtain that harmony exacts a toll against the individual subject.

It was Char's desire to express a pure ontological presence, as conveyed in poems such as "Chain," that appears to have fascinated Thompson. In the fragments of Thompson's PhD dissertation recovered by Peter Sanger and collected in *John Thompson: Collected Poems and Translations* (1995), Thompson aligns Char with Rimbaud and Baudelaire as a poet of presence and being. According to Thompson,

> [i]t is not absence and non-Being which Rimbaud seeks, but rather complete presence, the totality of Being. It is this stream of thought which comes from Baudelaire, through Rimbaud and the surrealists to which René Char belongs. In Char and the surrealists, the change in poetry, begun with the Romantics, from poetry-as-amusement, to poetry-as-Being and as a mode of knowledge, comes to full fruition. (281)

The transition from "poetry-as-amusement" to "poetry-as-Being" that Thompson speaks of demands a relinquishment of conventional notions of symbolic representation. As Thompson argues, "Char rejects the idea that the poem or image is figurative or representational, and the idea of the symbolic poem in the sense of the symbol being used to stand for, or represent something which in itself it is not. The things of Char's poems do not represent, they are" (283). In other words, Thompson recognizes in Char's work a materialization of language, an attempt to instill the poem with a sense of immediacy and presence. As Char writes in *Leaves of Hypnos*, the poem should "[b]elong to the leap," not "to the banquet, its epilogue" (138). Char's movement towards linguistic materialization positions the poem as an active object rather than as a representation of events. As such, the poem-as-material-thing acts on the individual in the present moment rather than attempting to represent a subjective or sentimental experience. The dialectic of possession and loss conveyed by the poem's representation of the elemental world is meant to exact an objective toll; because the poem is ultimately grounded in language and inevitably falls short of full presence, the physical sentiment that it enacts is frequently one of loss, pain or melancholy.

As Peter Schwenger notes, this experience of melancholy is characteristic of an abrupt recognition of the distance between perception and possession:

> There is a melancholy associated with physical objects. The melancholy differs from the traditional lament for the ephemeral object…The melancholy I am speaking of…is generated by the act of perception, perception of the object by the subject. This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately for the subject. It is we who are to be lamented, and not the objects that evoke this emotion in us without ever feeling it themselves. (1-2)

According to Schwenger, the melancholy we feel when confronted by objects of sentiment is related to an intrinsic understanding that we may not fully possess them as objects, we cannot experience them in the bare-

ness of their primeval state. As Thompson recognizes, this fissure between perception and possession is the cornerstone of Char's poetics. Rather than attempting to linguistically ford that gulf, Char's work seeks to intensify its disruption and to make the experience of alienation more physically palpable.

Evidence that Thompson was applying a theoretical interest in Char to his own poetry appears in each of the two slim collections he produced before his untimely death in 1976. In the poem "Apple Tree," from his first collection *At the Edge of the Chopping there are No Secrets* (1973), Thompson evokes the experience of melancholy that inevitably arises when confronted by a desire for presence within a disruptive and violent natural order. The poem's images of fire and decay recall those of Char's "Chain" and convey a natural world burdened by violence. The fact that the titular apple tree is made into a "cauldron of leaves" by the "deadly furnace" of the sun challenges the nourishing and regenerative properties associated with the fruit (55). The image's Biblical overtones imply that the speaker, lying beneath that "cauldron," is in a space of exile, fallen from a primordial relationship with an Edenic natural space. The force of the heat, which the speaker "cannot contain," appears to have a violent impact, as he contemplates "a head of burnt hair / crackling faintly" (55). Within this hostile space, the speaker realizes that the truth of being "possessed or / abandoned by a god / is not in the language" (55); rather, the most that can be hoped for is "the impure, the broken / green, the half-/ formed fruit / we reach for in desire, // calling it our harvest" (55). For Thompson, as for Char, the distance between possession and desire, or between presence and absence, is ultimately insurmountable. While the image of the apple tree suggests the possibility of a redemptive and regenerative relationship with the natural world, it is also a forbidden fruit that stands as a reminder of the distance between inclusion and exile within the fallen human world. Thompson's speaker finds himself at an impasse: aware that truth "is not in the language," the apple, as a symbol of the prelapsarian order is itself engulfed in figurative flames. The flames position the forbidden fruit as at once seductive and dangerous, indicating the implicit danger of attempting to conjure a truth beyond representation. The impossibility of possessing the apple tree's promise of fertile rejuvenation, whether linguistically or physically, becomes a source of melancholy for the subject; it reiterates the distance between the speaker's alienations within the world of representation and the possibility of a more authentic reality that lies beyond. By evincing this melancholy, the poem itself enacts a form of violence, one that demonstrates the irreconcilable alien-

ation from Nature at the core of ontological being. The dialectic of possession and loss that generates the poem's sadness recalls the Freudian death drive in its longing for an anterior state of being that can never be fulfilled in rational terms. As Schwenger notes, "in Freud's terms, there is a loss in the very evolution of consciousness, which splits in two what was once one and thus evokes a kind of nostalgia for the prior state…. Thus the death drive repeatedly enacts a dynamic of loss…. What is lost is not the object but our own prior state of objecthood, and perception can only stress the ways in which this is so" (5). Thus what Thompson's speaker longs for is not the apple tree itself, but the place anterior to language that would facilitate a harmonious return to the natural order. While, as Robert Gibbs states in a favourable review of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets*, poems such as "Apple Tree" "reaffirm the power of words moving or still on a page to renew the art of making live things" (301), they also demonstrate the sadness that arises when the difference between the poetic representation of live things and the physical world that exists beyond representation is fully realized.

Thompson may well have conceived of this melancholic and violent relationship between language and representation based on his study of Char, who identifies a similar anarchic yearning in the poems of his Lascaux sequence from *The Word as Archipelago* (1962), which devotes several poems to analyses of the prehistoric cave paintings in Lascaux, France. In "The Unnamable Beast," translated in this instance by Thompson, Char writes

> The unnamable Beast brings up the rear of the graceful herd like a clownish Cyclops.
> Eight jibing barbs adorn her, stake out her buffoonery.
> The Beast lows devotedly in the country air.
> Her stuffed, sagging flanks are painful, about to disgorge their fullness.
> A humid stench clings to her, from her hoof to her useless horns.
>
> Thus appeared to me in the Lascaux frieze, this fantastically disguised mother,
> Wisdom with her eyes full of tears.
>
> (175)

As Char's speaker perceives the cave painting before him, which depicts the mysterious animal at Lascaux generally referred to as "la licorne," he proceeds to construct a narrative that gives life to the otherwise inanimate

representation, an act that itself constitutes a representation of a representation, furthering his regression from the primal event mediated by the painting. His narrative posits the beast as a "clownish Cyclops" who, in her "buffoonery," "lows devotedly in the country air." The beast's bawdiness at first suggests that she consists of pure, primal instinct. Pregnant with possibility, her "sagging flanks are…about to disgorge their charge." While the figure of the beast implies a literal pregnancy, the charge that must be emptied from the beast's flanks also evokes the birth of art. The philosophers Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille, with whom Char maintained a close-knit intellectual relationship, both found in the Paleolithic paintings housed in the caves at Lascaux a point of origin for human artistic expression. For these writers "[t]he art of Lascaux functions as evidence of the emergence of new human creative possibilities opened up through art, but this moment of birth also carries the mark of finitude and death" (Smith 229). Implicit in the aesthetic act represented by the paintings is an act of annihilation that cleaves the physical, material object from its presence, and replaces that object with a representation that is no longer manifested exclusively in the physical world, but that takes its place in the mind of the perceiver. The presence of the aesthetic object, whether it is the paintings at Lascaux or Char's poem about the paintings, is therefore founded upon an absence. This annihilation of the object in the act of representation constitutes what Maurice Blanchot refers to as "the work of death." According to Blanchot, "it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address…. Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning" ("Literature and the Right to Death" 323-324). While the work of death allows words to take on their own material presence, apart from the figures and images they represent, it also reinforces the melancholy and alienation experienced by Char's speaker as he struggles to satiate an impossible desire for a more harmonious connection with Nature.

Char contemplates this tension between annihilation and presence in his representations of the Lascaux "frieze." While the primitively drawn beast is unnamable in terms of species, it is also unnamable because, as Char recognizes, naming the beast annihilates its presence as a material entity and replaces it with a representation of that reality. The beast's pregnancy is suggestive; it foretells the birth of art that the Paleolithic paintings signify from a historical perspective. This birth of art indicates the emergence of the very forms of representation that ultimately divorce human

experience from a holistic relationship with the primeval biotic sphere. Char thus recognizes in the painting "This fantastically / disguised Mother, / Wisdom with her eyes full of tears." The beast, however primeval, represents for the poet a maternal origin for the process of aesthetic representation, one literally frozen within the cave. Held within this moment of birth is a source of profound melancholy, suggested by the maternal "tears" stimulated by the recognition of the distance between nature and representation, implying sadness over the coming birth. The estrangement from the object-world caused by the violent act of enunciation is a source of melancholy for the poet. This longing for a prior state of objecthood, one that precedes the birth of art in the caves of Lascaux, manifests itself as a source of melancholy for the human subject now exiled from harmonious, or in Char's case "maternal," origins.

The figure of melancholy evoked by "The Unnamable Beast" recalls Julia Kristeva's description of the classic figure of melancholia:

> According to classic psychoanalytic theory…depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. "I love that object," is what that person seems to say about the lost object, "but even more so, I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am nonexistent, I shall kill myself.… Consequently the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore the realization that the hatred against oneself is a hatred for the other…." (11)

If this logic is broadened to fit the scope of the ecological, where the lost object which resides within human consciousness represents the fundamental estrangement from the primordial world conveyed by Char, then the primary condition of the human relationship to the ecological is one of melancholia. As Char's poem signifies, once the world of art and representation severs the human condition from its savage origins, returning to that lost original becomes impossible: it is in fact an "unnamable beast" that, "pregnant with possibility" but nevertheless beyond full reclamation, roams wildly and restlessly at the core of experience. The melancholy this causes manifests as both self-hatred, and hatred of a natural world that cannot be integrated into human social, political, and cultural paradigms.

Char's poetry therefore problematizes deep ecological readings that posit poetry as the vehicle for the reclamation of a more harmonious relation to Nature. Rather, Char's poetics suggest that faithfully representing the natural world is not only impossible, the recognition of that impossibil-

ity is a profound source of melancholy. If, in Kristeva's definition, melancholy constitutes an internalization of an irretrievable lost object that the subject simultaneously loves and hates, and if nature is the lost object against which the depressed person exacts this simultaneous experience of self-directed hate, then the essential experience of Nature is one of violence and mourning. As the lost object in Kristeva's definition, Nature is that which the self imbeds within so as not to lose, while simultaneously directing hatred at the self/object due to anger about its departure. The subject in relation to Nature therefore exists in a perpetual state of self-directed wounding.

The experience of Nature for Char is therefore contingent upon feelings of exile, suffering and melancholy. While Char chronicles the distance between pain and its symbolization within the French Provençal landscapes, Thompson poeticizes the experience of exile and melancholy evoked by the haunting landscapes of New Brunswick's Tantramar Marsh region, an area that has a near mythic place in Canadian literary history thanks to works by Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman, among others. In his second slim collection *Stilt Jack*, which was published posthumously in 1978, Thompson furthers the stark and haunting style of *At the Edge of the Chopping There Are No Secrets* by constructing a spare sequence of ghazals grounded in his experience of the unique Tantramar landscape. As he intimates in a brief introductory note to the sequence that explains the origins of the ghazal, his decision to adapt the form was made in conjunction with his desire to use the poetic to render visible the essential world: "There is, it seems to me, in the ghazal, something of the essence of poetry: not the relinquishing of the rational, not the abuse of order, not the destruction of form, not the praise of the private hallucination" (105). While the haunting poems are distinctly his own, their melancholic, surrealist inflected emphasis on the disruptive relationship between the individual and the ecological bear the imprint of Char's influence. This is evident, for example, in *Stilt Jack*'s first ghazal:

> Now you have burned your books: you'll go
> with nothing but your blind stupefied heart.
>
> On the hook, big trout lie like stone:
> terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved.
>
> Kitchens, women and fire: can you
> do without these, your blood in your mouth?

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> Rough wool, oil-tanned leather, prime northern goose down,
> a hard, hard eye.
>
> Think of your house: as you speak, it falls,
> fond, foolish man. And your wife.
>
> They call it the thing of things, essence
> of essences: great northern snowy owl; whiteness.
>
> (69)

The poem positions his speaker between the comforts of the human world and the allure of an anarchic knowledge beyond that world. The paratactic style of the ghazal intensifies the experience of fracture, emulating a rapid psychic movement between grief over personal loss, and a desire to locate a space of transcendence within the ecological. As such, the poem both produces images linguistically, and uses language as a material conveyor of experience. The speaker, having "[b]urned" his "books," or shed away the space of literature and representation, is left to confront the world with nothing but his "[b]lind, stupefied heart." The act of book-burning indicates a violent desire to destroy the world of language and representation, that which orders and conceals the primary "otherness" negated by the birth of symbolization conveyed in Char's "Unnamable Beast." Complicit with this burning is a violence directed against the self. If language is that which provides order, then its absence leaves the speaker both "[b]lind" and "stupefied," no closer to a fundamental reconciliation with the atavistic world. Rather than freeing him from representation, burning his books leaves him "[o]n the hook," still fighting (and using words) in his struggle to overcome representation. The trout "fiercely whip their heads" as they attempt to dislodge the hook, an act that, through the couplet's paratactic juxtapositions, also implies the speaker's psychic state as he attempts to shake off his sense of confinement within the "real" world of simulations. The idea that the trout "lie" like stone further suggests the impossibility of transcending worldly representations. The beauty of the trout, free in the river, is itself a "lie," an idealistic projection of the human onto the ecological as a pristine utopian space. In order to give the appearance of lying like a stone, a trout must, of course, remain in battle with the current. As an avid fisher and outdoorsmen Thompson would no doubt have been aware of this fact, which indicates that his use of the image implies a human projection of natural serenity that fails to disclose the struggle implicit in the trout's existence, as well as his own.

Confronted by this lie, the speaker continues to seek new means of locating a space anterior to linguistic representation. However, this desire also causes him to long for the human comforts unavailable to him in such an anarchic space. As he struggles to shake the hook that binds him to the human logic of domination, symbolized by the act of fishing as a human intervention within the natural world, he simultaneously wonders if he can "do without" "kitchens," women and fire." Each of these images evokes a primal and instinctive desire—food, sex, and warmth. However, these desires are also linked to his inclusion within the material world. Here again the boundary between the world of representation and a space anterior to that world seems blurred; the worldly elements he longs for exist, perhaps insufficiently, within his everyday life. At the same time, the fact that he simultaneously laments and seeks to overcome his cultural conditions demonstrates the inherent difficulty of relinquishing the world of representation. Recognizing that he is at once an objective being within that world, and a subject of its discursive conditions, he struggles to find a way out of its dialectic of possession and loss.

As he contemplates these conditions, he does so with "blood in his mouth," which at once recalls the hook in the mouth of the trout, and suggests that his desire to transcend the material world in pursuit of bare existence has violent repercussions against his subjectivity. While the "rough wool, oil-tanned leather," and "prime northern goose down" indicate a longing for authentic human-made items, he simultaneously fetishizes a "hard hard eye." The "eye" evoked by Thompson has several layers of signification. On one level it suggests the need for a vigilant perception capable of locating a more authentic way of being in the world. On another level it connotes the need to shore up his own self (eye/I) against the external pressures that leave him feeling exiled and alienated. Further, the "eye" recalls the "eye" of the hook that has bloodied his mouth and left him grappling to overcome its logic of domination. Unlike the barb of the hook, however, the eye signifies a space of absence that signals a passageway from being "hooked" in the world of linguistic representation, to an unknown, anarchic space beyond signification.

The desire to pass through that eye appears to be furthered in the fifth stanza, where the speaker, a "fond, foolish man" is confronted by his falling house. This literal destruction of the boundary between interior and exterior suggests the speaker's loss of interest, or control, in relation to worldly comforts. That which literally contains him within the material world is figuratively coming apart around him. However, this dissolution is once again parsed with a dialectical desire to return, or at least to lament,

the loss of cultural comforts. The speaker ambiguously thinks of his house and his wife in a manner that implies regret and sadness, indicating both his fondness for them and his foolishness for allowing his world to collapse around him. This tension between inclusion within the material world and the desire to transcend it is furthered in the poem's final stanza, wherein he meditates on "the thing of things, essence of essences: great northern snowy owl; whiteness." Thompson's speaker longs for that which precedes the work of language, the absence that is paradoxically annihilated by his poem as the work of death. The speaker's recognition of his space of exile between possession and representation, as in the case of Char, produces the sense of melancholy inherent in the recognition of the objective world as other. In this sense, Thompson's subject position resembles the "un-usable waste" that Žižek argues subverts the circle of recycling that symbolizes a utopian vision of the ecological. From this space of exclusion, caught between social responsibility and a yearning to transcend the social in order to reconcile with a primeval natural space, the speaker becomes that which cannot be reconciled by the utopian vision of deep ecology; or, that which remains, paradoxically, unnatural.

However Thompson, like Char, attempts to transcend the dilemma by speaking from the lacuna between culture and pure ontology, emphasizing the melancholic relationship between perception of the object world and its unattainability. For both poets, the remainder of that experience of melancholy, the pain that it leaves as a trace of experience, is the key to a fuller understanding of being. This means more than representing the ecological as a disruptive space; rather it requires use of the poem as a material entity, one capable of increasing the distance between inclusion and exile and exposing a point of aporia in which the experience of pain emerges as the mediator of bare, anarchic existence.

Exposing this point of aporia becomes a matter of poetically evoking contingencies between the experience of pain and ontological certainty. As Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain* (1986), the link between physical suffering and certainty is one that the experience of pain makes clear:

> For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that "having pain" may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to "have certainty," while for the other person it is so elusive that "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is "to have doubt." Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. (4)

For Char and Thompson, this moment of pain is the remainder that resists subjection to the political realm and that signals the vestiges of an authentic experience of being. The goal of their poetry is not to use a more irenic form of language capable of bridging the fissure between subject and ecology; rather it is to use a more disruptive language capable of splitting the absorption of bare life by cultural discourse asunder. In other words, the goal of exposing the gap between the symbolic world and the traumatic Real is to cause pain, to give the poem material agency. As Scarry argues, "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (94). The poem as an event of rupture, through its use of a violent and fragmented language that causes pain, speaks to an ontological certainty by exposing the limits of linguistic signification in a manner that foregrounds the sense of frustration, melancholy, chaos, and suffering implicit in that experience of exile from natural origins. It is precisely in this space of rupture that Char and Thompson posit the locus of a more profound and integral relation with the natural world. The ecological, in these terms, is postulated not as a space of unification or holism, but one that can be experienced only through an encounter with essential violence, disruption, and indifference, elements that for these writers are as natural as organic unity and harmony.

By intensifying this disruption and relying upon the discomfort it creates in order to posit a more certain, if more violent, ontological space, their work refuses the positivist foundation or absolutist ground of nature sought in deep ecology. For Char, the poem as a form of material presence is the weapon of choice in the struggle to define a space of being beyond representation. This is accomplished by utilizing the image in a fashion that provokes, through its instantaneous irruption on the page, a violent presence that briefly frees the poem from its incarceration within linguistic representation. As Herman Rapaport claims, "[b]ecause the instant of the word is immediately realized, much in the way a sound is made by a hammer hitting an anvil, Char's language discloses the essence of a pure exteriority, the sound of a hammer hitting an anvil without explanation or justification" (95). The immediacy of the image, and the attendant violence it conveys, is both seen and felt in Thompson's translation of Char's "The Peaks of Montmirail," which, in its fragmented and nonlinear form, appears to anticipate Thompson's later ghazals. Each of the poem's strophes has an aphoristic tone that emphasizes the tensions between art and

representation, pain and satisfaction, desire and loss, and other dualities. In Thompson's translation the first six strophes read:

> If there is to be grief, let it be harsh.
>
> Poetry thrives on perpetual insomnia.
>
> It seems that the sky has the last word. But it speaks in such a low voice that no one ever hears it.
>
> There is no withdrawal, only a millennial patience on which we are leaning.
>
> Sleep, you who despair; soon it will be day—a winter's day.
>
> With death, we have only one recourse: to make art before it.
>
> (207)

Each strophe functions as a distinct irruption that emphasizes a recurrent immediacy rather than a linear narrative pattern. The first strophe demands that grief be harsh, asserting that within the moment of grief there is a pain that eradicates language and allows the irruption of certainty. The second strophe indicates that searching for this pure presence beyond the rational is poetry's domain. As "perpetual insomnia," poetry exists on the hither side of reason and rationality, of the logic associated with daily experience. For Char insomnia is a restlessness that gropes for the solitude and certainty of sleep, always falling just short. Insomnia also implies the discomfort of this poetic condition; yet for Char it is precisely the certainty of the felt experience associated with discomfort that he aims for. Later in the sequence Char implies that for those who feel despair in this state of insomnia, sleep is itself a form of inoculation as "soon it will be day" and the rational order of the world will be returned. The day, however, will be "a winter's day," barren, cold, and frozen in the stasis of the world the poet desires to overcome. The play on words of Char's sixth strophe recalls his contemplations in "the Unnamable Beast": taken literally the line is a call to arms stating we have only so much time to make art before death catches up with us. However, Char also uses death here to signify a space beyond language, that which the insomnia of poetry is perpetually bent towards. For Char, art can bring the violent immediacy that will allow for access to this space. As the poem progresses through its aphoristic strophes, it is this message that gets reiterated. Commiseration with ontological certainty

requires the full and frequently violent immediacy of a moment capable of transcending linguistic representation. As Char writes, "[t]he essential is what escorts us, at the desired time, along the way. / It is also a dim lamp in the smoke" (208). In other words, while we are in pursuit of the essential, its accessibility is always dim and corrosive; access to it requires the certainty of a somatic experience that can destroy language. Nevertheless, for Char it is precisely the pursuit of the essential that compels the poetic instant: "[t]his snow: we loved it; it had no path; it revealed our hunger" (208). The snow here suggests the blankness of the white page (which anticipates the "whiteness" of Thompson's "Ghazal I"). While it had no path initially, the making of the poem revealed the hunger of the writer to define himself within its blankness. The snow also more literally implies the desire for self-definition within the barren ecological world. Thus the hunger for literary self-definition is analogous to the search for presence within a natural world whose expression is founded upon the absence created by naming. According to the aphoristic sequences of Char's poem, that search is contingent upon the experience of the certainty of pain, either through the immediacy revealed by linguistic rupture or through the certainty of somatic discomfort. Pain is that which allows for the emergence of feeling contingent with the violence of naming that ultimately renders the natural world absent.

For Thompson, the ghazal form provides a similar capacity for linguistic materialization. In "Ghazal XXX," for example, Thompson, notorious in his personal life for wielding a hunting knife at literary gatherings, appeals to the sharp edge of a violent space conveyed through images of the elemental world:

> The mind tethered, head
> Banged with a hardwood stick;
>
> Sense a mangled iron
> and the fire gone cold.
>
> Read it all backwards; start with Act III;
> a clean pair of heels.
>
> The muck of endings; drunk beginnings;
> yattering histories, rodomontades, anabases.
>
> Get to the bloody point:
> seize the needle,

day, plainness: cold sea, that
one grain of sand.
(107)

Here Thompson layers images of elemental existence on top of one another with little recourse to concern for lyric. The ghazal demonstrates the importance of violent fragmentation and disruption within a poetics that addresses primal nature. Such disruptive language "unblocks what is singular and non-synthetic more generally in relation to the emergence of unpredictable possibilities" (Clark 133). In the poem the speaker's mind is "tethered," his "head / banged with a hardwood stick," suggesting a desire to physically overcome a mind/nature dualism through an overt act of violence. This desire is furthered as he ponders "The muck of endings; drunk beginnings; / yattering histories, rodomontades, anabases." Thompson's use of the terms "rodomontades" and "anabases" evoke both the bombastic and yattering, discursive history from which humanity has emerged, and also the manner in which that discursive history has violently exiled individuals from those origins. Anabases' dual meaning as both an expedition and conquest, and as the preliminary stages of disease, indicates a correlation between a logic of human domination in relation to the ecological, and human presence within the biotic sphere as a form of slow contamination. Counter to these images of domination and contamination, Thompson, in another of the poem's paratactic juxtapositions, proclaims the need to "Get to the bloody point: / seize the needle." In this double-entendre he correlates the act of writing with self-inflicted violence; yet this violence is one that is contingent upon a seizing control of an otherwise "yattering" and wayward relation to the object-world. To correlate writing with violence, as we have seen with Char, is to attempt to emphasize the work of death implicit in language, thereby evoking a state of melancholic suffering that ultimately resists objectification in language. It is through this violent rupture that a sense of ontological clarity, an anterior state of things, emerges, one evoked by the much more placid and elemental final stanza, with its images of "day, plainness: cold sea, that / one grain of sand."

For Thompson, as for Char, this disruptive poetics predicated upon intensifying the fissure between subject and object, language and event, challenges the predominant ecocritical presuppositions about the possibility of a harmonious return to Nature. As Blanchot surmises, "Why should not man, supposing that the discontinuous is proper to him and is his work, reveal that the ground of things—to which he must surely in some way belong—has as much to do with discontinuity as it does with that of unity"

(*Infinite Conversation* 9). For Thompson and Char, this disunity is not so much that which will reveal the ground of things; rather, it is the ground of things itself. The violence of the poem that, through the irruption of the word, mediates the transcendence of meaning and positivism, becomes the precise locus for the experience of a state anterior to language. Their dependence upon ecological images indicates that nourishment, as grounded in nature, is yielded by the experience of pain facilitated by the disruptive poetic act. In short, the point at which language is destroyed, the point of oblivion, is also that which nourishes by grounding the self both ontologically and ecologically. Their poetry therefore offers a renewed means of understanding the relationship between human and natural, and between language and violence. The wilderness for these poets is precisely that impossible space, outside language, beyond the realm of human use. While this poetics of ecological violence and disruption offers no politics of liberation that adequately addresses the current epochal crisis of the environment, it does offer a re-enchantment of the exclusive power of the elemental, one that remains always capable of chastening the destructive Western anthropocentric impulse with its affirmation of the natural sphere as a space of radical disruption. The poems of Char and Thompson, as weapons of choice against a continued Western logic of ecological domination, demand recognition of our fundamental estrangement from the wild, as well as an awareness of the contingency between biotic violence and somatic suffering implicit in the moment of ecological catastrophe.

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