

**GENNADY AYGI**

**FROM TIME OF GRATITUDE:  
“A SNOWDROP IN THE STORM”  
“RENÉ CHAR”**

**TRANSLATED BY PETER FRANCE**

## A SNOWDROP IN THE STORM

(MIKHAIL SESPEL)

Outside my window the glimmering of the dim white November outskirts of the city is gradually becoming for me the place of a kind of forgetting... Where am I? - for a long time now I seem to have been transported into some half-forgotten distant places... – and then to have begun wandering through a far-off, long-gone field amid snow-filled ravines – there were indeed such wanderings in real life, in just such a desolate twilight; it is hard in this dim and flickering darkness to draw a clear line separating dreams from visions, or from memories of something “real”.

Somewhere, among those “eternally”-distant ravines which were once home to me, in a poor Chuvash village, in the November twilight of the year 1899, a boy-poet was born, one who would be for ever a young-man-poet, dying at the age of twenty-two.... – he died more than sixty years ago, and he (not just an “image”, but the *pain* within me) has not ceased troubling me, from my early years to the present day.

He chose as a pen-name the word “SespeL”, which means a snowdrop in Chuvash. The flaming tornado of the Revolution was raging through the land, its reflections were to the young Chuvash dreamer like the flashes and surges of his own inner world. At last, in the darkness of hopeless poverty, in the patriarchal stagnation of the life surrounding him, the long-awaited Thaw of his time had come – was he not the first flower piercing the snow? – timidly at first, and then ever more radiantly stretching out not just to the shining of the day, but – as he put it – to its fiery “transfigured face”, stretching into the distance and depth of that “face” – he would always call it the “New Day”, with capitals, and only in a poem written a few days before his death did the “burning concentration” of the New Day transform itself into the impenetrable “bottom of the Day”.

He is one of the most tragic poets known to me, and this tragedy lies as much in the combination of circumstances in his life as in his own intimate nature.

He was not a “child of love”. Half a century after her son’s death, his mother would recall with unconcealed hostility the husband to whom she was married against her will. The memories of this illiterate woman, recorded from her talk, strike one by their almost Faulknerian details and images. On the night before her wedding, she dreamed of an axe gleaming on the threshold of a poor Chuvash house. This dream axe became real in the life of the family eleven years later: SespeL’s mentally unbalanced father killed his brother with an axe in a drunken brawl. He was condemned to forced labour in Siberia. SespeL the boy

felt a *kindred spirit* in him - this half-literate peasant, devoid of any conception of “talent” and its links with “fame”, was captivated by his son, who impressed him from childhood on with his lively imagination and grown-up thoughtfulness; “you’ll be something no-one has ever seen before” he used to tell the boy (and Sespel’s unceasing longing for his father recalls Dickens’s lifelong gratitude to his own weak-willed father simply for having realised his uniqueness and being “captivated” by him).

A year before this tragedy Sespel the herdsboy fell asleep on the wet ground when he was looking after the horses grazing at night; from then on until the end of his life he suffered from agonising tuberculosis of the bone.

On his mother’s side he was the grandson of a pagan priest – years later people still remembered this old man’s remarkable mastery of the language of spells (later on, in Sespel’s revolutionary poetry, his “spell-binding” energy amazed readers by its wild, unbridled force, its unsurpassed vividness of language).

During Sespel’s adolescence there were periods when a crisis in his illness made it impossible for him to walk. His younger brother took him to school by sledge – a distance of several kilometres.

There was a rare kind of fire concealed in this sickly young man with his anthracite eyes; the deep-red flashes would soon begin to cut through his ominous poems, which showed not only a frenzied, perhaps even excessive, love for his native land, but also something “alien” to the language and the aesthetic ideas of his people; this genuinely Rimbaud-like fire came close to terrifying his fellow-countrymen.

And there was something Rimbaud-like too in his actions, which did not fit easily into the boundaries of familiar everyday life, the “quiet, sleepy” communal life that surrounded him. The young Sespel, like the young Rimbaud, left home (he didn’t “run away”), stopped attending the village school so as to take part in the continuing war against Germany, got as far as the army lines, but was disillusioned in his “patriotism”, returned home and became a supporter of the Bolsheviks.

It is significant that such passionate, reckless actions of Sespel’s, so unusual in his society, were never individualistic “escapades” – they were caused not by any destructive tendencies, but by his deeply organic striving for the *ideal*, the urge to create new, ideally just relations between people. Despite unimaginable material privations, he completed a course at a teachers’ college in a small Russian-Tatar town (his heart aching at the knowledge that sometimes, in order to pay for her son’s education, his mother had to sell her last bags of rye and she and his younger brothers go hungry). Given the provincial backwardness of the school, his education was extremely inadequate (his favourite reading was the banal mediocrity Nadson, but if young Sespel was a sentimental decadent in his letters of those

years, once he started writing his own poetry he immediately displayed a mature mastery of language).

Sespeľ became one of the first Chuvash Young Communists and was given work in the district criminal investigation committee. Sometimes barely able to walk, he spent days and nights travelling through Chuvash and Tatar villages, torn between his unreserved support for the new order and his compassion for those who continued to live in the obscure poverty and degradation of “ordinary” life. He had to investigate a major crime, involving a poor drunken peasant whose arrest left his large family without a breadwinner. Sespeľ, having obtained a harsh judgement against the criminal, kept sending money to the man’s family from his meagre salary (in the guise of “official aid”). Arriving in a Chuvash village on another case, he would go out in the evening after the day’s investigations and help a needy family plough their piece of land. When speaking to the peasants or at meetings he was all thunder and lightning, but at friendly gatherings he was “neither seen nor heard”: “I shared a little room with him over a long period”, one of his friends remembered, “Mikhail had one striking ability – he moved about amazingly quietly, I was struck in general by his remarkable gentleness in everything he did.”

In the spring of 1921 someone set fire to the building of the Chuvash Justice Division, and Sespeľ was arrested on the strength of a false denunciation. He was subsequently released (but expelled from the Communist Party) and went for treatment in the Crimea, his tuberculosis having got much worse. Once the treatment was over, the poet became a wanderer through an immense country, spending the last two years of his life in the Ukraine. A terrible famine had broken out in the regions bordering the Volga. “My country, my country is at death’s door”, he keeps repeating in his autobiographical writings, knowing that his voice will remain unheard. Working in the Ukraine as a famine relief instructor, he frequently came across groups of fugitives from the Volga region. “I see them at the station, starving people with terrible emaciated faces, in rags, fugitives from the Volga”, he wrote in January 1922 to a Ukrainian friend, “in the recent hard frosts they were dying in droves in one place or another, sick, freezing people; their bodies were loaded by their hundreds on to sledges and driven away, open to the elements...In the market place, where masses of goods are being sold and there are rolls and loaves of bread, lard, everything you need, these fugitives from the Volga lie bare-footed, covered in sores and dressed in rags and they beg for bread without saying a word...” He wrote this at a time when he was crippled by tuberculosis of the bone and barely able to limp along; he knew he was doomed: “my body is disintegrating like a corpse, there’s no stopping it”, he wrote in a diary as early as 1920.

During his lifetime Sespeľ had fewer than ten poems published in Chuvashia. Strange poems, in places “nearly Chuvash” in their incredibly daring imagery, they seem almost

“wildly alien” when set among the old-style half-folkloric syllabic verses of the period. And now, in the far-off Ukraine, poetry became for Sespel the hidden inward space (an almost anatomical place) where his inner spasms found a “suffocating” expression in convulsive lines of verse.

There is certainly something of Mayakovsky in him. But strangely, he showed no particular interest in him. Was it that he was wary of a kind of ego-nucleus in Mayakovsky’s tragic stance, a kind of self-infatuation of the Russian poet in his own tragic fate? When Sespel, on the other hand, at the height of spiritual tension, moved deliberately and resolutely towards his own destruction, his “metaphors” (but are they metaphors? this is not Mayakovsky’s famous “heart on fire”, elaborately constructed on formalist linguistic principles), his “similes” and images are torn out of the pain of his very being, like clots of blood (“all bloody – what is this in my hand? – I break it, turn it to dust, to meat, tear the veins, it is my heart, mine, Mikhail Sespel’s bloody heart”). How opposed to folklore is this poet whose origins lie deep within the people! ... but as the years pass and I think of him more and more, I seem also to hear, behind the “scraps of meat” of his metaphors, something of the secret “murmuring” of the people, there is something “not spoken to anyone” that emerges like a muttering-and-whispering (“who can hear it then?”) in the depths of that “silent speaking” that was half-chanted, half-muttered by the people – and that “secret chasm”, as I see it now, seems to glimmer elusively yet steadfastly behind the light-and-darkness of Sespel’s poetry.

I have remarked elsewhere how Sespel, true to the modesty and discretion of the people, never allowed himself to *aestheticize* the tragic. He might well have flung this tragic element in the face of contemporary poetry in images equalling those of the Surrealists, but this would have been a narcissistic “literary” act for him; in Sespel’s work it is the people who “cry out”, not the poet. Did he even realize that tragedy had found in him an exceptional *mouth* (more than a voice)? He had no time to realize it, he had to *finish crying out*, incarnated in the “crucified body of the people”. Or rather, this incarnation was there from the *very beginning*, but now everything was growing confused: where he had once “cried out” – was it him? – everything went silent, as if all meaning had been taken away, and this silence grew into the emptiness of a sudden, indefinite Abandonment, it became a kind of single body, and then – this was now the only source of breath still continuing – the ghost of a cry: “Eli! Eli! Lama Sabachthani!...”

Perhaps he could feel death entering into him, as the young Trakl no doubt felt it – but isn’t the Austrian poet spellbound by the allure of death, like some blue, blue beauty?

Sespel’s move towards death was not a “settling of scores” with life. Was he “needed” or “not needed” (not for destruction, but for creation)? – that remained the essential *problem*

for Sespel, right up to the hour of his death. “I am no longer needed, I must *remove* myself, this will happen very soon”, he said clearly, quietly and calmly to his last friend, a Ukrainian peasant poet. “Think again, Mikhail” “I’ll think, and I’ll tell you what I decide, I promise.” For once in his life Sespel did not keep his promise, one day soon afterwards he failed to return to the house where he and his friend were living. He had taken his own life in an avenue of lime trees near the village of Starogorodka in the Chernigov region.

The officials who came to investigate the cause of death took away most of the poet’s papers, which never resurfaced. This was the second great loss of his manuscripts, the first being when all his papers were seized on his arrest in Cheboksary in 1921. His poetic legacy is now about 30 poems – they are the unequalled masterpieces of Chuvash poetry.

1983

# HENCEFORTH

## (THE LAST DROPS OF BLOOD)

*Poem by Mikhail Sospel*

*Translated from the Chuvash via the Russian of Gennady Aygi*

Henceforth, turned into stones, in heaps,  
The warm word, frozen, has stuck in the throat,  
From the forest top day's light has fled,  
And death lies over the world henceforth.

Barefoot on to the Hill of Torment  
They have led my country, led her by the hand.  
The bloody sweat of the walls of Cheboksary  
Is held in my shattered heart henceforth.

All bloody – what is this in my hand?  
I break it, turn it to dust, to meat,  
Tearing the veins. It is my heart,  
Mine, Mikhail Sospel's bloody heart.

Like a dog that has had its hide ripped off,  
I shall beg a crust in a stranger's yard,  
Some drizzly day I shall drop down dead,  
Hungriily howling for Cheboksary.

Henceforth from my innards, dried up with hunger,  
Will come only the groan of the cold graveyard,  
My soul will be filled with a massive millstone  
Henceforth, henceforth, henceforth...

1921

## RENÉ CHAR

**(INTERVIEW WITH THE BBC, MARCH 6 1988, ON THE DEATH OF RENÉ CHAR)**

*Gennady Nikolaevich, how would you characterize in a few words your creative relations with René Char over the last twenty years?*

I have been corresponding with Char since 1968. On the publication of my Chuvash-language anthology, *Poets of France from the Fifteenth to the Twentieth Century*, René Char was the first person to respond. In order to do this, he copied out the publisher's address in Cyrillic script, rather awkwardly it is true, and thank goodness, this precious postcard reached me. The mere fact that the first to write to me was France's greatest contemporary poet made a big impression on me. Writing back to thank him, I told Char that I had difficulty getting hold of his books and only possessed a few isolated volumes of his. And he began sending me all his publications, and other things besides – he often sent me pictures of his native Provence, of Avignon and the Vaucluse, and we began to correspond regularly. I addressed him as “Maître”; I felt myself to be in some ways his follower, and I once told him so directly. He always replied in words of rare precision, and these replies buoyed me up in periods of black despair, when I seemed to be struck dumb, surrounded by a deathly silence. What is more, I gradually came to feel a desire on his part to associate me with his country, with Provence and his beloved Sorgue, which came to take on a symbolic resonance for me. I felt that he was making me a gift of his homeland. So now, in losing him, I have lost not only a favourite poet, but a friend and teacher. A friend who having sensed a kind of confusion in my feelings, once wrote to me: “Let us thank life for sometimes being less demanding of us than people usually think”. How often I felt happy and at ease with life and the world when I remembered these wise words of my beloved “distant interlocutor”!

*What attracts you to René Char's poetry?*

In recent decades, or more precisely in the whole period since World War II, there has been – quite logically, perhaps – a decline of the Word as humanity's most essential possession. The Word has begun to degenerate and has lost its significance as the preeminent creative force; in our day, generally speaking, poetry has gradually been transformed into sheer rhetoric and a self-contained game of “literature”, and we have seen a cult of contempt for

life and for the world as such, and then a cult of despair – or in reality, pseudo-despair, since this calculated “despair” served as the basis for solid worldly careers.

In this contemporary world, where the word has degenerated so much, I cannot name a poet who has steadfastly and over a whole lifetime maintained the dignity and greatness of the Poetic Word as René Char has. He was a great stoic, but a man of more than one dimension; even this word “stoic” once produced the following reaction from him: “To be a Stoic is to freeze into immobility and to wear the beautiful mask of Narcissus”. He tended to reject the very possibility of a self-definition of this kind, and in this sense his spiritual struggle was at the highest level: if ever he achieved anything, he seemed immediately to begin struggling with himself and splitting himself along the line of truth; he showed immense vigilance on half of the struggling spirit.

*René Char is a hermetic, difficult poet, but in France he had an established reputation, he was a kind of patriarch. As you see it, how compatible are poetic hermeticism and the appeal to a wide circle of readers?*

The interconnection between the Word and life, in the case of René Char, was always a strange one. He exerted a continuous influence on the whole of European poetry, an influence that was both overt and secret. It seems to me that his secret influence was much the greater. And his poetry undoubtedly contains a great secret, which we associate with the term “hermeticism”. When readers stop respecting the Word and take no account of it, then the Word exercises its own self-respect, it becomes proud in the good sense of the word: it *does not shut itself away*, but acquires a still greater dignity in itself. It is as if the Poetic Word was saying: “It’s not a question of whether you want to know me or not. But if you do want to know me, you must be prepared to engage in something very serious.” I think that so-called “hermeticism” is a kind of trust in the human being, in the *creative* human being who becomes a co-creator, a co-poet. If René Char is read very attentively, he never leaves the reader without a light, without the gift of special illumination, without a new wisdom even. And the fact that such a personality and such a poet, constantly seen as “hermetic”, should have possessed great popularity (*narodnost*) and even become an object of national pride in his lifetime, is explicable, as I see it, by the fact that over the last half-century or more the conception of *narodnost* in literature has changed radically. It is not the same thing as accessibility, or rhetorical “clarity” for a wide circle of readers; it is rather (and René Char’s work seems to me a proof of this) a complex light from the deep roots of ethics and aesthetics, fused together with the sources of national culture, which are still perceptible if one can only retain the memory of them and find in oneself a fidelity to them.

In my view, René Char's work is unique in demanding that we pose and resolve the problem of popularity (*narodnost*) in poetry in a new way, with a new depth and on a new creative basis.

*You also addressed René Char in poetry. For instance, there is a poem of 1970 dedicated to him...*

Yes, that is the poem entitled "Field: in the full blaze of winter". I have already mentioned that over the years of our correspondence Char "gave" me various aspects of his native land. In this poem of 1970 I did what I could to present René Char, my favourite French poet, with the face of my country – this was the only gift I could give him, and the most precious.

[Telephone interview conducted by Igor Pomerantsev for the Russian service of the BBC]

## FIELD: IN THE FULL BLAZE OF WINTER

*to René Char*

god-pyre – this open field

letting all things pass through (mile-posts and wind and distant specks of mills: all  
more and more – as if from this world – not in waking – gathering distance:  
oh all these are sparks – not rending the flame of the pyre-that-is-not-of-this-  
universe)

“I am” – without trace of anything whatever  
not-of-this-universe shining  
god-pyre

1970