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Returning Upland: The World of René Char's Poetry

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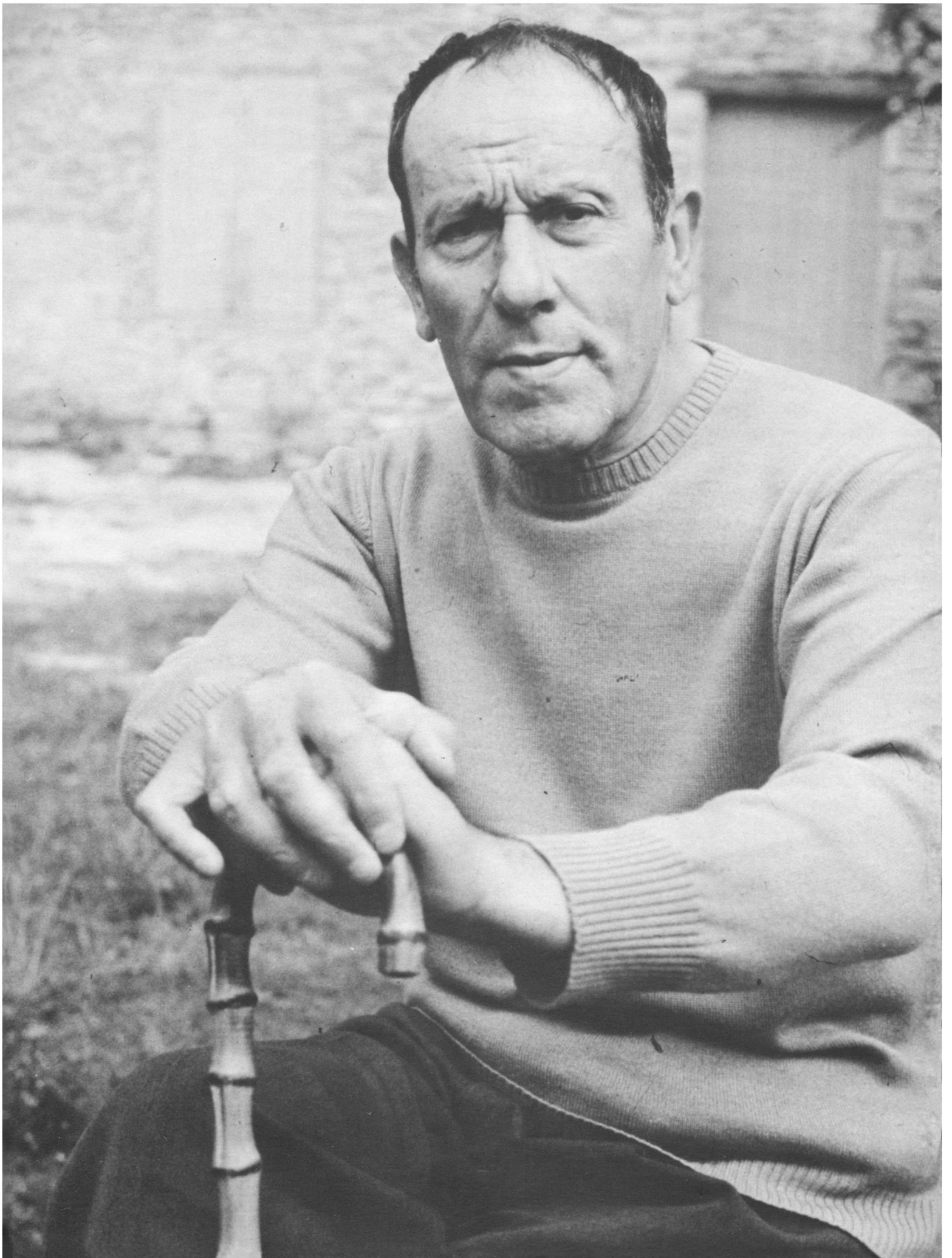
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## Focus on René Char

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### Returning Upland: The World of René Char's Poetry

*A human meteor has the earth  
for honey.*

R. Char (1974)

By an interesting coincidence, the year 1927 witnessed the beginning of René Char's poetic career with the publication of his first poem, "Témoignages de grandeur" (Testimonials of Greatness), in the Parisian journal *La Revue Nouvelle* and the launching of *Books Abroad* in Norman, Oklahoma. In this issue *World Literature Today* (formerly *Books Abroad*) is happy to pay tribute to one of the major figures in world literature today, an author considered by many critics the greatest living French poet. Char celebrates this summer his 70th birthday, and his work spans a half-century of poetry, a truly vast archipelago of poems which contains ample proof of greatness.

Major poets are not unlike major novelists in that both create their own worlds and chart their own countries of the imagination. Fortunate the writer who succeeds in making his own native city or province into the hub of such a world. Even rarer the case for such a writer to defend his native region, arms in hand, against an enemy in wartime, to live to tell the story and finally to settle there. In such a work landscape, biography, poetry overlap to a degree that makes their separation impossible. In our century of violent outer and inner displacements such miraculous equivalences seem to belong to a mythical golden age. Yet all this holds true for René Char.

Born in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, not far from Fontaine de Vaucluse, Petrarch's place of exile, the cosmic drama of Char's poetry was destined to be enacted in this Provençal setting close to the Sorgue River. There are the mountain peaks and ranges addressed in many a poem: Montmirail, Luberon, Ventoux; place-names such as Le Thor, Vaucluse, Venasque, Buis-les-Baronnies, Lourmarin, Lascaux, Thouzon, the lost Roman town of Aerea. The native flora and fauna are evoked equally lovingly: lichens and saxifrage, lavender and lily of the valley, orioles and swifts, the lark and the trout, the bull and the viper. An elemental, ancient land of multiple cultures carries Char's poetry. There is never any doubt where he starts out from and whither he returns. Paris could attract him but temporarily.

From 1929 to 1934 he was a member of the surrealist circle around André Breton. Friendship bound him to Paul Éluard. Surrealism enriched his poetic vision but without quenching his independent spirit. This was memorably demonstrated during the Nazi occupation when Char became Captain "Alexandre" in the resistance movement, the underground *maquis*, in which he directed operations from the mountainous region near his own birthplace. The concentrated poetic notes from these war experiences were published in 1946 as *Feuillets d'Hypnos (Leaves of Hypnos)*. They made him instantly famous. After the war Char settled at "Les Busclats" in L'Isle-sur-Sorgue, dedicating himself entirely to poetry.

Char the Provençal poet and his sense of place; Char and surrealism; Char the engaged poet in word and deed—these are some of the reasons explaining the fascination he has exerted on several generations of readers. Yet there is still another facet which needs to be stressed, and that is Char's talent for friendship. Friendship especially with painters and sculptors whom he has called his "substantial allies." A partial list of artists who have illustrated Char's poetry follows: Arp, Braque, V. Brauner, P. Charbonnier, Dali, Max Ernst, L. Fernandez, Ghika, Giacometti, Kandinsky, Wilfredo Lam, Henri Laurens, Matisse, Miró, Picasso, Joseph Sima, de Staël, Vieira da Silva, Jacques Villon, Zao Wou-ki. They have interpreted him and he has written about them. This amazing record was visually dramatized in the "Exposition René Char" organized in 1971 by the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris and the Maeght Foundation. The catalogue of this exhibit and Char's own *Le monde de l'art n'est pas le monde du pardon* (Maeght, Paris 1974) are the best introduction into this aspect of the poet's life work.

But what about Char and his relation to philosophers, aphorists such as Heraclitus and Nietzsche? Two articles in our issue deal with this topic. Char has in turn attracted philosophers; Martin Heidegger visited him repeatedly and participated in the three seminars held at Le Thor near L'Isle. There is a rapprochement



of poetry with philosophy and painting in the writing of Char.

Another way of presenting Char's achievement would be to see him as an original link in the central tradition of modern French poetry, which for the last 150 years has given so many fertile impulses and has set an example of sophisticated perfection to poets around the world. This is not tantamount to saying that all the greatest modern poets are necessarily French, only that their literature shows a uniquely consistent development from Baudelaire to Bonnefoy. Without any claims to completeness or finality, a dozen other names come to mind at once: Nerval, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire, Perse, Reverdy, Éluard, Char, Ponge, Michaux. No sooner are these names set down than several others ask to be considered too: Corbière, Laforgue, Milosz, Jouve, Jaccottet, Lecuire. . . . Modern French poetry is an inexhaustible lode.

Char was presented to English readers back in 1956 with the selected volume *Hypnos Waking*. Two decades later Mary Ann Caws has made another effort to introduce this complex original poet with her twin volumes of criticism and translations: *The Presence of René Char* and *Poems of René Char* (with Jonathan Griffin), both from Princeton University Press. Although ours is the first Char issue in English, it was preceded by three special issues in French: *L'Arc* (Aix-en-Provence) dedicated an issue to him in 1963, *Liberté* (Montreal) in 1968 and *L'Herne* (Paris) in 1971.

Char ceased to be a famous name for me and became a living presence around 1965. The enthusiastic cham-

panioning of his work by the late Estonian critic Alexander Aspel (1908–1975; see *BA* 47:4, pp. 640–42 on him) helped in no small measure to open up Char's world for me. Paulène Aspel's concentrated essay "The Poetry of René Char, or Man Reconciled" appeared soon after I assumed the editorship of this journal (see *BA* 42:2, pp. 199–203). I have elsewhere described my first personal meeting with the poet on 1 May 1975 (see *BA* 50:1, pp. 78–79). The decision to dedicate an issue to him was made later that year. Mary Ann Caws's advice has been invaluable and her collaborations truly manifold. The illustrations in our issue were selected from photographs—several previously unpublished—placed generously at our disposal by René Char himself. The Turco-Swedish poet-photographer Lütfi Özkök, a longtime collaborator of this journal, was responsible for the artistic excellence of many of these photographs. Besides being the director of a film on Char, he is also the co-translator of a selection of Char's poems into Swedish. To all of them I express my warmest thanks. May our efforts bring more readers to Char's poetry! It is a "Library on Fire" without one book's being burned; light incessantly renewed. To quote from Camus's tribute published in the collected edition of Char's poems in German: "One cannot do justice on a few pages to a poet like René Char, but one can at least determine his place. Certain works deserve that we seize every opportunity to express the gratitude we owe them, even when we cannot do justice to all their subtleties."

I.I.

## List of Abbreviations

Quotations from Char's poetry, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the following volumes, many of them containing previously published works. The list is an augmented version of that found in Mary Ann Caws's book *The Presence of René Char* (Princeton University Press, 1976). The place of publication for French titles is Paris, for those in English, New York, unless otherwise indicated.

*Le poème pulvérisé*, Fontaine, 1947. (PP)  
*Le soleil des eaux*, Gallimard, 1951. (SE)  
*Lettera amorosa*, Gallimard, 1953. (LA)  
*Hypnos Waking: Poetry and Prose*, Jackson Mathews, comp. & tr., Random House, 1956. (HW)  
*Poèmes et proses choisis*, Gallimard, 1957. (PPC)  
*Commune présence*, Gallimard, 1964. (CP)  
*Retour amont*, Gallimard, 1966. (RA)  
*Fureur et mystère*, Gallimard, 1967. (FM)

*Les matinaux*, followed by *La parole en archipel*, Gallimard, 1969. (LM)  
*Trois coups sous les arbres*, Gallimard, 1967. (TC)  
*Le marteau sans maître*, followed by *Moulin premier*, Corti, 1970. (MM)  
*Recherche de la base et du sommet*, Gallimard, 1971. (RBS)  
*Le nu perdu*, Gallimard, 1972. (NP)  
*La nuit talismanique*, Skira, 1972. (NT)  
*Leaves of Hypnos*, Cid Corman, tr., Grossman, 1973. (LH)  
*Aromates chasseurs*, Gallimard, 1975. (AC) (First version in *Argile*, no. 1, 1974.)  
*Sur la poésie*, GLM, 1974. (SP)  
*Poems of René Char*, Mary Ann Caws & Jonathan Griffin, trs. & eds., Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1976. (PRC)