

Classic Poetry Series

René Char
- poems -

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René Char(1907 - 1988)

Born in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue in 1907.

During his brief participation in the surrealist movement, he published with Breton and Eluard the collective work, *Ralentir Travaux*. He preserved the technique of automatic writing, but only to move beyond it.

In 1934, he gathered all the surrealist poetry of the time under the title " *Le Marteau Sans Maître /*", and then quietly broke his ties with the group. He explained his rupture with the group in a letter to Benjamin Péret in 1935 in the following terms: " /Surrealism needed to be dissolved gracefully in order to protect it from the humiliation of becoming centenarian. But aren't you fatalistic? Was the descent of Sade, Rimbaud, and Lautréamont entirely intellectual? Seeing this pathetic compromise coming, I refused to sanction it. I am leaving this circus. "

The war in Spain incited him to participate (*Placart pour le Chemin des Ecoliers*, 1937). As of 1940, Char joined the French Resistance, where he became renowned. His poetry, written in an urgent tone, became a celebration of the movement (*Fureur et Mystère*, 1948). After the Second World War, he pursued his personal goal of reaching a high degree of poetic strictness (*La Parole en Archipel*, 1962).

At the end of his life, concerned about the environment, he became one of the french nuclear energy project's strongest critics. He died in Paris in 1988.

excerpt from the introduction to *Hypnos Waking* by Jackson Matthews:

He is an abundant man - in size, in vitality, in speech, in silences, in ideas and affections, in seriousness, gaiety, gentleness, violence. The sum of all these is a kind of brooding intensity that seems at any moment free to take any turn. He is exalted and harried by the excessive life in him. He speaks in the rhythms of Provence where he was born, where he grew up, and where he still lives in part. He studied at the lycee in Avignon and at the University in Aix. He was one of the early surrealists.

But it was the war and his experience as the leader of a Maquis group in Provence that have most deeply affected his work - channeled his major themes, furnished the substance and many of the subjects of his later poems. The privation, the hunger, the moral suffering of those years were somehow turned into the passionate economy of his style, his rage to compress everything into

aphorisms and short bursts of prose.

Char restores to the poet his mission in our distraught world. This is the major burden of his work. He has faced the difficult conditions of human freedom, and understood the role of the imagination in the life of man. He defends poetry with the passion of Shelly but with more human warmth and wisdom. It is in his humanity, his love, that Char stands above most of his contemporaries. But this love is fatally crossed. For the poet is the visionary leader of man, an absolute figure alone on the frontiers of the possible, "there where the sky just went down." His task is to bring into being the unhoped-for, the unexpectable. In the high lucidity of his star-crossed love, in the flash of the poem, Char has learned how to hope and how to praise.

Forehead Of The Rose

Despite the open window in the room of long absence, the odor of the rose is still linked with the breath that was there. Once again we are without previous experience, newcomers, in love. The rose! The field of its ways would dispel even the effrontery of death. No grating stands in the way. Desire is alive, an ache in our vaporous foreheads.

One who walks the earth in its rains has nothing to fear from the thorn in places either finished or unfriendly. But if he stops to commune with himself, woe! Pierced to the quick, he suddenly flies to ashes, an archer reclaimed by beauty.

René Char

The Lords Of Maussane

One after the other, they wished to predict a happy future for us,
With an eclipse in their image and all the anguish befitting us!
We disdained this equality,
Answered no to their assiduous words.
We followed the stony way the heart traced for us
Up to the plains of the air and the unique silence.
We made our demanding love bleed,
Our happiness wrestle each pebble.

They say at this moment that, beyond their vision,
The hail terrifies them, more than the snow of the dead!

René Char

To...

You have been my love for so many years,
My giddiness before so much waiting,
Which nothing can age or cool;
Even that which awaited our death,
Or slowly learned how to fight us,
Even that which is strange to us,
Both my eclipses and my returns.

Closed like a box-wood shutter,
An extreme and compact chance
Is our chain, our mountain-range,
Our compressing splendor and glow.

I say chance, O my hammered one;
Either of us can receive
The mysterious part of the other
While keeping its secret unshed;
And the pain that comes from elsewhere
Finds its separation at last
In the flesh of our unity,
Finds its solar orbit at last
At the center of our own cloud
Which it rends and starts once more.

As I feel it, I say chance.
You have raised up the mountain-peak
Which my waiting will have to clear
When tomorrow disappears.

René Char