The poetic universe of René Char is a magical one, a world where the invisible is eternal, where violence and destruction are intimately linked with the act of poetic creation, and where the poet must retain a proper balance between what he reveals and what he hides. In Char’s poetry, permanence and invisibility are inseparable. Every object that is visible corrodes with the passage of years. There is no permanence in the visible, whose features are carved out in space and bound by time. The invisible is outside time, unbound since it is intangible, not susceptible to corrosion since it inhabits no space. It is eternal. The act of violence annihilates the visible, that which perishes in time, and preserves in its wake the essence. Throughout Char’s poetry the reader is confronted by acts of violence and destruction that result in this magical transmutation. In “Permanent Invisible,” the poet hunts for permanent invisibility in the flesh through the act of making love. In the end it is the poem that captures that reality. The “Poplar Tree’s Effacement” describes the obliteration of a tree during a lightning storm, and its consequent liberation from the earth as its trunk is transmuted by fire, leaving only the poplar’s essence. Char writes, “If we dwell in a lightning bolt, it is the heart of the eternal.” The poet too summons the lightning
bolt of inspiration in whose fire he is consumed, disappearing in the flames of the creative act. The lightning bolt is the poet's revelation. In the end, what remains are the words of the text, like charred fragments of an intense encounter, the creator erased in the act of creation, present on the page as luminous, as essence.

Char is also concerned with the problems of artistic exposure. In “The Warbler in the Reeds,” the bird (poet) is able to sing her “cavatinas” only after she has vanished from the sight of the hunter’s gun and become invisible. There is a constant element of risk and danger present in Char’s world and the urgent problem of the poet is to determine how much to reveal and how much to hide. In the poem “To Resume,” Char writes, “We suddenly got too close to something from which we’d been kept at a mysteriously favorable and measured distance. Since then, corrosion. Our headrest has disappeared.” The poet must respect a certain distance between himself and the reader. To show too much can be deadly as is the case with the warbler. So too, the poet must be precise and specific enough to convey the mystery while using ellipses to counterbalance the explicitness.

In Lightning: The Poetry of René Char, Nancy Piore writes that Char “deplores the technological mind which turns the earth into an object to be regulated, willed, which strips away all mystery, or attempts to.” True sight is in the heart; science is blind. Reason limits and destroys the true essence of beauty, which is pure, sensual, and eternal. In the words of Piore, “The heart’s domain is poetry, and poetry can capture beauty without killing it.” Reason leads to the death of beauty. The poet tries to capture the essence of true beauty, which is intangible and mysterious, through using ellipses and creating a “saving distance” between himself and the reader. This poetic process also involves an effacement of the self. The poet is fleeting. He must not linger too long in one place. Piore also writes that “the poet refuses to ‘found anything’ — systems, kingdoms, servitudes.” The poetry of René Char concerns the invisible which is eternal, the transmutation of the finite into an eternal essence through destruction, and the proximity that can kill.
Char’s poem “Permanent Invisible” concerns the theme of invisibility as eternal, the way in which poetry can capture the beauty that is elusiveness itself:

Permanent invisible of coveted hunting grounds,
Close, close, invisible and almost in my hands
O distant quarry, those nights when I sink down
To novice flesh against flesh.
Drinking against the cold, being brutal restores.
Over this double garden you form a rounded dome
You are solid as the rose which is to be.¹

In the poem, the poet is hunting that which is “absolutely and for all time beyond his reach, and which paradoxically the poem captures.” The poet, through a brutal act of love making with an impermanent and visible woman, almost reaches that which is intangible, elusive, and thus the most lasting of realities. Ultimately, it is not the woman but the poem that captures that reality. The image of the rose before it exists suggests something that is eternal. It is not bound by time or space since it does not exist. It is the infinite rose, the beautiful unity that is permanent. The poet attempts to capture what eludes him. Char writes, “The poet does not hold onto what he discovers; having transcribed it, soon loses it. This makes him new, infinite, endangered.” In “Permanent Invisible,” Char is describing the elusive beauty that is just beyond his reach, a beauty which the poem finally captures.

In the prose poem, “The Warbler in the Reeds,” the bird, in hiding from the gunshots of the hunter, becomes invisible and undergoes a transformation which unifies her with the world in the moment of song:

The tree most exposed to the shotgun’s eye is not a tree for her wing. The quicksilver one is forewarned: she will pass

¹ From *Nakedness Lost*, translated by Patricia Terry, in *Selected Poems of René Char.*
through in silence. Her fugitive claw grapples and gives up at once a perch in the willow. But from her hiding place in the clustered reeds, what cavatinas! It is here that she sings. As the whole world knows.

Summer, the river, spaces, lovers hidden away, a whole watermelon, the warbler repeats, “Free, free, free, free.”

The warbler is silent until she cannot be seen—“she will pass through in silence.” She finds a hiding place in the “clustered reeds” where she sings her “cavatinas.” The poem suggests the “saving distance” that the poet must retain in order to avoid death. The bird vanishes into the reeds as the poet vanishes into the text of his poem. In the last sentence of the poem, a magical transformation occurs. The last line of the poem suggests that the “summer, the river, spaces, lovers hidden away, a whole watermelon,” are the warbler. In her invisibility she has become her surroundings. In the instant of her song, she is infinite and free, “all heaviness evaporates, all things are transformed and unified, freed of their earthbound substance to become pure light, pure song, freed of their separate and constraining identities to become transparent.” The moment of song is eternal. In her invisibility the bird (poet) is able to create her art, fueled by the constant threat of danger, showing caution in expression through ellipsis.

In Char’s universe, violence and destruction are intimately linked with the act of poetic creation. Through annihilation the poet preserves essences. The image of lightning is often used in connection with this theme of creation through destruction:

The hurricane is stripping the woods.
I lull the tender-eyed lightning to sleep.
Let the great wing where I tremble
Marry the earth where I grow.

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2 From The Word as Archipelago, translated by Patricia Terry, in Selected Poems of René Char.
Its breath sharpens my vigil.
How turbid it is, the hollow
Of the sullied streambed’s lure!

A key will be my dwelling.
The feint of a fire the heart confirms;
And the air whose talon holds it.³

The poplar tree is destroyed in a lightning storm, a brilliant explosion that appears in much of Char’s poetry. The key to the poem is the lightning bolt carried in the talons of the air that results in a, “fiery spacious death, the kind that Char covets.” Char writes, “The spacious lightning and the fire of a kiss / will charm my tomb set up by the storm.” The tree is liberated from the earth, its flesh transmuted into fire, so that what remains is essence. Jean Starobinski has suggested that the key is also the poem. Indeed, it is the poet’s disappearance that illuminates the words of his text. When the poet writes, he holds the lightning in his hands and vanishes in the explosion. He is liberated in the flames of revelation. What remains is the essence, that luminosity that lights up the page, the permanent invisible that is the essence of beauty itself.

In the poem, “Robust Meteors,” violence and magic are also allied in the act of poetic creation:

In the wood we listen to the worm boiling
The chrysalis turning toward a clear face
Its natural deliverance

Men are hungry
For secret meats for cruel implements
Rise up beasts to slaughter

³ From Nakedness Lost, translated by Nancy Piore, in Selected Poems of René Char.
To reach the sun.⁴

For René Char, the chrysalis is an emblem of things to be, of future creation. Char is describing violence as a rite of passage into another state of illumination. Violence is equated with a kind of death that leads to rebirth. Mechthild Cranston, in his essay “Violence and Magic: Aspects of René Char’s Surrealist Apprenticeship” writes, “man and animals must pass through death, must be strangled or slain with ‘cruel implements,’ must offer up their ‘secret meats’ to reach, like the chrysalis, their natural deliverance. Only after death will they be lifted, as by enchantment, to the realm of the sun, where man and the beasts will live forever, transformed into the eternal animals of the sky.” The act of creation involve annihilation in order to “reach the sun,” the final illumination that is the poem.

The “Mortal Partner” is a poem about the act of poetic creation itself. The poem describes a man and woman in the center of the white surface (the page) of the boxing ring. They begin to fight. After several blows their battered heads are swaying and nodding. From the poem,

At that instant [the man] must have purposely pronounced something into the second’s [the woman] ear so perfectly offensive, or appropriate, or enigmatic, that the latter let fly a lightning bolt, abrupt, complete, precise, which knocked the incomprehensible fighter out cold.

Char characterizes the poem as offensive, appropriate, enigmatic. Poetry provokes, it is a weapon yielded with accuracy and it is also enigmatic. It destroys its enunciator. Nancy Piore writes, “The poet’s self must be effaced, impersonalized, torn-up and re-begun, to yield that piece of the permanent invisible that is the poem.” The poet comes too close to the secret of life itself. He dares to approach the unapproachable and this is both what

⁴ From *The Hammer with No Master*, translated by Mary Ann Caws, in *Selected Poems of René Char*. 
destroys and illuminates him. The result of the encounter is an explosion which erases the poet and leads to his rebirth in and through the poem. Char characterizes the encounter between the poet and his act as a violent struggle. Words hit with the force of bullets and the act of creation is charged with electricity and annihilation, the poet perishing in the “desperate nuptial conflict which yields his poem,” which illuminates the blank surface of the page.

Another major theme in Char’s poetry concerns the problem of artistic exposure, the extent to which the poet must reveal or conceal certain secrets that lay at the heart of the world: proximity is deadly. In the poem, “To Resume,” Char writes that “We suddenly got too close to something from which we’d been kept at a mysteriously favorable and measured distance. Since then, corrosion.” As this distance vanishes, corrosion dominates, insidiously gnawing away at all forms. Char writes, “Our headrest has disappeared.” Our intellect has set the vicious and destructive process in motion. Char detests the technological mind and declares that, “Science can only furnish devastated man with a blind lighthouse, a weapon of distress, tools without legend.” The true visionary is the human heart. Science and reason destroy the beautiful mystery of life by attempting to regulate and categorize all it sees. Char seeks to regain a sense of the mysterious and his method is ellipses counterbalanced by clarity and precision. René Char calls for ellipses and brevity in poetry. Gone are the times of the verbose adoration and self-obsession of the Romantics. Char writes, “The adoration of the shepherds is no longer useful to the planet.” There is no longer any need for poetry that is passive. Char’s concise, structured, enigmatic poems hit with the strength of a fist, with the speed of a bullet. Piore writes, the “poem veils the poet’s nakedness and his naked vision of the world he wishes to exhibit and preserve and therefore must hide from the reader even as he shows it.” Nonetheless, the problem of artistic exposure is a complicated one and not easily resolved. Char writes, “If what I show you and what I give you seem less than what I hide, my weighing is poor, my reaping ineffecutual.”
Char’s approach to this problem is to seek a form of rebirth in the stripping away of “life’s ugly accumulation to find again the gaze that loved it enough in the beginning to display its foundation.” The poet must look with the eyes of a child whose impressions are impulsive. The poet must see with the same wonder and desire of a child in order to share his vision of life’s substructure which is mysterious, magical. At the same time the poet must be strong and active. Char’s brief encounter with surrealism nurtured his idea of revolt as a means of change and his participation in the Resistance awoke in him the importance of action. Char has written that, “Comfort is a crime.” The poet uses ellipses to convey the sense of mystery in his poems. The poet vanishes, omits things, does not dwell on topics, offers no explanations. He simply leaves. He oscillates between visibility and invisibility, lucid and aware, but refusing to create systems. Each of his poems captures an instant and renders it eternal and yet the poet himself is never secure. For Char, the act of poetry is “virgin, even if repeated.” It is this insecurity, this burning intensity, that keeps the poet from becoming passive. He must always be on his guard in a world of danger and risk while he produces his magical poems of mysterious beauty. The poet is continually creating, moving onward to new worlds of perception that are magical, infinite. He is active in the world, a magician of fantastic planets. Char writes, “The poet does not hold onto what he discovers; having transcribed it, soon loses it. This makes him new, infinite, endangered.”

In Char’s world, the invisible is eternal, violence and destruction liberate the visible from the chains of time, and proximity is deadly. In his universe the visible perishes. The essence is invisible, incorruptible and eternal. The image of the lightning bolt suggests the intensity of revelation and its consequent effacement of the self, leaving in its wake the permanent invisible, the luminous, which is the poem. Poetry must be impersonal and enigmatic. Char achieves a sense of the mysterious substructure of life through ellipses and brevity. Proximity can kill; poetry requires a certain distance and precision to convey the mysterious beauty which lay at the heart of the world. He must counterbal-
ance obscurity with explicitness, and in this manner avoid the corruption of this beauty by placing it within rigidly logical and confining mental systems. In an essay on Char, written in 1958, Albert Camus wrote,

Char does more than express what we are: he is also the poet of our tomorrow. Although he remains alone, he brings us together, and the admiration he arouses mingles with that great fraternal warmth within which men bear their best fruit. We can be sure of it; it is in works like his from now on that we will seek recourse and vision. Char’s poems are messengers of truth, of that lost truth each day now brings us closer to, although for a long time we were able only to say that it was our country and that far away from it we suffered, as if in exile. But words finally take shape, light dawns, one day the country shall receive its name.

Works Cited
