

Points of Light

An appreciation of the late Anthony Hecht.

By

Eric McHenry

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Anthony Hecht '50GSAS lived a long and eventful life, but unlike so many poets he did not outlive his gift.

Hecht died of lymphoma on October 20, at the age of 81. His poem “Motes,” which appeared a few days later in *The New Yorker*, displays all of the virtues for which he has long been admired: the attentive eye, the uncorrupted conscience, and the breathtaking facility with difficult forms. Hecht’s long, silken sentences emerge from the most compact of carrying cases — octaves of rhymed iambic trimeter — without a single wrinkle:

They wandered out of gloom
Into some golden shaft
Of late-afternoon light,
Those tiny filaments
That filled me with delight,
Lifted by an updraft
Or viewless influence
There in the living room.

“I’m old enough to be able to feel old-fashioned,” Hecht told *Columbia* magazine a couple of years ago, “which is to say I don’t feel any obligation to apply myself to experimental poetry or to find something new.”

In fact, Hecht never felt such an obligation. His first volume, *A Summoning of Stones*, appeared exactly 50 years ago, and it is as poised, elegant, and indebted to the

English and classical verse traditions as anything he has written since. Hecht didn't so much reject as modify the famous modernist injunction, dedicating himself, like his aesthetic kinsman Robert Frost, to the search for old ways of "making it new." And in doing so he became, arguably, the greatest American sculptor of traditional stanzas since Frost. (If Richard Wilbur and James Merrill weren't Hecht's contemporaries, it wouldn't even be arguable.)

Hecht showed a similar dedication to a small handful of themes — variations on a single theme, really, once summarized by the critic Adam Kirsch as "the anxiety of the civilized mind facing the large and small barbarisms of the age." In "Motes," he addresses the ways in which children's stories both forestall and, ultimately, ensure disillusionment: "The shrewd, well-tried / Ways that a child is kept / From some shrouded, grownup truth." It is a subject he had first visited decades before, in the poem "It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It" from his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Hard Hours*:

And in their fairy tales
The warty giant and witch
Get sealed in doorless jails
And the match-girl strikes it rich.

I've made myself a drink.
The giant and witch are set
To bust out of the clink
When my children have gone to bed [. . .]

And that their sleep be sound
I say this childermas
Who could not, at one time,
Have saved them from the gas.

This conclusion, the very antithesis of a fairy-tale ending, contains a faint but unmistakable echo of the most familiar fairy-tale beginning. By violating the rhyme-scheme at such a pivotal point — the poem's penultimate line — Hecht puts considerable pressure on the words "at one time." It's an unsettling irony, because "Once upon a time" is so necessarily nonthreatening, imprecise, and distant, whereas "At one time," to one acquainted with the grownup truths, is horrifyingly

recent and specific.

Hecht was better acquainted with these truths than many, having served in the division that liberated the Flossenburg concentration camp in 1945. He rarely wrote of his wartime experiences, but they haunt much of his oeuvre. “Tarantula or The Dance of Death,” ostensibly about the Black Plague, contains the lines “Runes were recited daily, charms were applied. / That was the time I came into my own. / Half Europe died.”

The title Hecht gave his final volume, *The Darkness and the Light*, would work equally well for his Collected Poems. He spoke to the spectrum. Best known for his somber lyrics, he moonlighted as a master of comic verse; he was the only recent American poet who could claim to have invented a popular form — a game, galloping little number known as the double-dactyl. And even his bleakest poems tend to offer some small measure of solace, or the potential for it. Sometimes, admittedly, the redemptive element is merely Hecht’s unwillingness to find a redemptive element. In the much-anthologized poem “More Light! More Light!”, ironically named for the dying words of Goethe, Hecht sees “no light” in the eyes of those tortured by Nazis, and there’s something fundamentally satisfying about his icy refusal to reassure.

His points of light aren’t always so ironic, though. In the late poem “Memory,” Hecht lets his mind revisit the “dark and airless” parlor of some long-dead relative, perhaps a grandparent. Nothing, it’s clear, has escaped his notice — not even the “twenty minutes in late afternoon,” when “the brass andirons caught a shaft of light [...] / in a radiance dimly akin to happiness.”

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