Arts & Humanities

Anthony Hecht: The Larger Order

By
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Anthony Hecht ’50GSAS is revered among poets and critics for work that has, for nearly half a century, embraced the tension of addressing public and private worlds teetering on the edge of chaos, while maintaining order within the lines of a hard-wrought poetic form. Richard Howard has written with admiration for Hecht’s artistry of “producing no more than *what he has set out to make*”; Brad Leithauser invokes Gerard Manley Hopkins and Hecht in the same breath, as both seek “desperately to reconcile earthly woe with heavenly well-being.” Hecht’s poems can be alternately woeful and wry, never settling easily into a harmonic chord. “It may be that the ultimate wisdom / Lies in saying nothing,” he writes in “A Voice at a Séance,” then concludes: “I think I may have already said too much.”

Hecht was born in New York City in 1923. He entered Bard College as an undergraduate in 1940 (Bard was at the time an experimental adjunct of Columbia University) and was called up for military service in 1943. As a soldier he was sent to France, Germany, and the former Czechoslovakia, then redeployed to occupation duty in Japan, covering both hemispheres.

“There is much about [the war] I have never spoken about and never will,” Hecht has said. He saw combat in the European campaign, and it was his division that liberated Flossenburg, a concentration camp in the Bavaria forest, close neighbor to Buchenwald. In his two earliest volumes of poetry, *A Summoning of Stones* (1954) and *The Hard Hours* (1967), those experiences emerge somberly—yet irregularly and with an air of distraction—in poems such as “A Deep Breath at Dawn,” and the better-known “More Light! More Light!” But Hecht’s poetry—early and later—is never about that war so much as it is about the larger order within which the experience of war fits. In his recent book of poems, *The Darkness and the Light* (Knopf, 2001), a triptych poem called “Sacrifice” replays the Abraham and Isaac story in a French

village during 1945, three separate voices speaking of one brief moment of salvation without surprise. Today Hecht says, “It was an astonishingly disruptive time for any man, especially those it threw into battle. As a poet I could not not write about it.”

In 1951, a year after graduating from Columbia, where he studied with Mark Van Doren and Lionel Trilling, Hecht was awarded the Prix de Rome Fellowship, the first time the prize was ever given to a writer. But Hecht was already in Italy, living on the island of Ischia. It’s there Hecht first met W.H. Auden, whose work he admired a great deal. Eventually they got to know each other, Hecht says, and Auden “invited me to show him some of my work. He was very gracious, taking almost two hours to sit and talk about the poems.”

It is Hecht’s lifelong assessment of and regard for the whole of what Auden produced as a poet that can be seen in his critical work, *The Hidden Law*. That “Law,” which Auden said “. . . takes the atom and the star / And human beings as they are, / And answers nothing when we lie,” is never far from view in Hecht’s own work. “Everyone hopes for, dreams of, an order,” Hecht says. “Poems are based on this view of the possibility of that order, the possibility of making again tomorrow what one has made today. Otherwise we’d go mad.”

The arc of Hecht’s achievement as a poet and critic (eight books of poems, four books of criticism, a collaborative translation of *Aeschylus*, and two edited anthologies) is matched by his reputation as a teacher, predominantly of literature. He has taught at Bard College, Smith College, University of Rochester, Washington University, Harvard, and Yale. From 1985 until he retired in 1993, he was University Professor at Georgetown.

Hecht has also collaborated with visual artists. He has written poems to accompany the engravings of Thomas Bewick, Lynd Ward, and Leonard Baskin (*The Seven Deadly Sins* and “The Presumptions of Death” in *Flight Among the Tombs*). Readers of *The Darkness and the Light* will find several midrashic, dramatic monologues on persons and scenes from Hebrew scripture and the Christian Bible, such as Judith, Miriam, the Witch of Endor, and travelers with St. Paul. “These poems,” Hecht says, “were meant to accompany illustrations Leonard Baskin would have made had he not passed away a few years ago. So now they stand alone.”

Hecht, who will turn eighty next year, has just completed a new collection of essays on poets and poetry, entitled *Melodies Unheard* (to be published in spring 2003 by

Johns Hopkins University Press). He has also written five or six new poems toward a book. “But I write poems one at a time,” he says. “I’m old enough to be able to feel old-fashioned, which is to say I don’t feel any obligation to apply myself to experimental poetry or to find something new.”

That is not to suggest, however, that Hecht’s work has stopped struggling with the public and the private, order and chaos. In the final chapter of *The Hidden Law*, Hecht comments on the refrain to the final “Lauds” section of Auden’s *Horae Canonicae*, “In solitude, for company.” It is, he writes, this paradox of Auden’s that the poet confronts: “There is no such thing as the State, / And no one exists alone.” Hecht seems closest to his mentor in this: writing poetry is a civic duty. It’s perhaps for this reason that his signature dramatic monologues speak with a pared-down, sometimes brutal, honesty, while his more private lyrics seem never without a tone of hope or celebration. Just as lights in the passage from day to dusk to dawn again, in the poem “‘The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee’” (Psalms 139:12), evoke an image of “the elderly and frail / Who’ve lasted through the night, / Cold brows and silent lips, / For whom the rising light / Entails their own eclipse, / Brightening as they fail,” Anthony Hecht seems determined to direct us not toward separation so much as necessity in what is “brightening” and “failing,” in the territory of the soul and the state. His is a poetry of lasting.

Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-seven

The harbingers are come. See, see their mark;
White is their colour, and behold my head.

Long gone the smoke-and-pepper childhood smell
Of the smoldering immolation of the year,
Leaf-strewn in scattered grandeur where it fell,
Golden and poxed with frost, tarnished and sere.

And I myself have whitened in the weathers
Of heaped-up Januarys as they bequeath
The annual rings and wrongs that wring my withers,
Sober my thoughts and undermine my teeth.

The dramatis personae of our lives
Dwindle and wizen; familiar boyhood shames,

The tribulations one somehow survives,
Rise smokily from propitiatory flames

Of our forgetfulness until we find
It becomes strangely easy to forgive
Even ourselves with this clouding of the mind,
This cinerous blur and smudge in which we live.

A turn, a glide, a quarter-turn and bow,
The stately dance advances; these are airs
Bone-deep and numbing as I should know by now,
Diminishing the cast, like musical chairs.

-Anthony Hecht
(from *The Darkness and the Light*, Knopf, 2001)

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