

The Shorter Poems of Anthony Hecht

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While there is no clear dividing line in Anthony Hecht's work between longer and shorter poems, or between "lyrics" (a word now bearing a faint musty smell) and satires, sequences, narratives, or didactic pieces, I intend to focus here on poems not exceeding the length of a sestina (thirty-nine lines), though I shall violate that stricture early on for purposes of comparison. The "sestina" rule is an arbitrary but not meaningless division. The exigencies of brevity force on the writer a terseness and selectivity often not found in longer pieces, and discourage the use of narrative, by which I mean described sequential events, to engage a reader's interest and achieve emotional resolution. The short poem, in brief, must rely on the telling detail and often on the reader's capacity for inference. Its nemesis is digression.

Hecht's genius is not necessarily for brevity. In fact it is clear that a tension exists between his drive to be definitive and his innate expansiveness. The forms this expansiveness takes include the proliferation of examples and the display of wide and recondite learning. Thus what might well be a short poem in the hands of another writer can become, for him, an ebullient – and extended – exercise in verbal dexterity, carried along by sheer wit. "The Cost," a poem of seventy-two lines prompted by the ironic vision of contemporary youth and vigor next to Trajan's column in Rome, that monument to imperial ambition and squandered lives, opens with a lengthy virtuosic meditation on the physics of riding a motor scooter. "A Love for Four Voices," homage to Franz Joseph Haydn, manages to be nearly as free of denotation, over nearly twenty pages, as a Haydn quartet. Though nominally about love, it aspires to an abstraction more easily attained through music than through words. But such poems, while illustrating Hecht's prevailing disposition; lie outside our scope.

I will also pass over the translations, though many are short, except to observe that the "Chorus from *Oedipus at Colonus*" affords an opportunity to compare Hecht's work with that of his eminent older contemporary Robert Fitzgerald and in that way to see some of Hecht's singular qualities. Here are a few lines in Fitzgerald's version:

The last attendant is the same for all,
Old men and young alike, as in its season
Man's heritage of underworld appears:
There being then no epithalamion,
No music and no dance. Death is the finish.

And here is Hecht:

And the same gaunt bailiff calls upon us all,
Summoning into Darkness, to those wards

Where is no music, dance, or marriage hymn
That soothes or gladdens. To the tenements of Death.

Fitzgerald's version, an exemplar of the plain style, carries the staid dignity we expect in a classical monument. Hecht, while not departing from that style or its decorum, makes it vivid as well, with the "gaunt bailiff ...summoning," and the "tenements of Death."

These excursions beyond our allotted territory should be sufficient to demonstrate two of Hecht's salient qualities: his facility in creating vivid language and his boundless capacity for invention. Both are excellent attributes for a poet, but they are not without risk, as we shall see.

In the poems by Hecht's own hand we encounter a similar quality of invention, most strikingly seen in the creation of metaphor. In "Curriculum Vitae" Hecht observes school children breathing on glass in the frosty air of a winter morning, and sees them as the ghosts

Of some departed us,
Signing our lives away
On ferned and parslied windows of a bus.

In "Crows in Winter," the crows are "a meeting / of morticians in our trees" They inhabit "a bituminous air" (the atmosphere or their manner? – probably both),

And the wind, a voiceless thorn,
goes over the details,
making a soft promise
to take our breath away.

The poems are peppered with Hecht's wide-ranging erudition, as in this description of a camel at the start of "A Ruminant":

Out of the Urdu, into our instant ken,
ambles the gross molester of the Sphinx,
our *oont*, or camel,
hunchbacked from failed exertions, poor Ur-Punch
and brigand clown of Noah's passengers,
the Hebrew *gimel*

for the deformity it's luck to touch.

Such details abound and frequently delight. In the poem called "Illumination" they almost overwhelm. Ostensibly about an old-master painting of the Nativity, it is also a disquisition on the source of saffron coloring used in the artist's paint.

Celestial tinctures smuggled from the East,
From sunlit Eden, the palmed and plotted banks
Of sun-tanned Aden. Brought home in fragile grails,
Planted in England, rising at Eastertide,
Their petals cup stamens of topaz dust,
The powdery stuff of cooks and cosmeticians.

A contemporary source (Archibald & Gorst, *Lapis and Gold: Unlocking the Secrets of Medieval Illumination Techniques*) notes, “Saffron is collected from the fall-blooming *Crocus sativus*, which is quite similar in appearance to the *Crocus vernis* which announces the first bloom of spring each year. Care must be taken not to mistake these two flowers.” It may be that Hecht did confuse the two crocus species, but he was not a painter. He was an enthusiastic scholar for whom these facts were key elements in a poem of seventeen lines of loose blank verse that finally come round to their point in the final three:

The child lies cribbed below, in bestial dark,
Pale as the tiny tips of crocuses
That will find their way to the light through drifts of snow.

What motivates this poem is therefore a multiple analogy:

As the old East produced the crocuses that later flourished in the West ...
As old masters used paint made from them to gild the sleeves of angels ...
As old lore comes alive in a new setting ...
As crocuses push up through snow to flower ...
So the child and all it represents will find its way through the cold to light.

Some readers may feel that the energy and weight of the poem lie in the “as” clauses of these summary statements – in the proliferation of details of horticulture, Renaissance trade, and the techniques of the old masters – rather than the unsurprising conclusion drawn from all this detail.

A similar reading of human affairs through horticulture informs “Public Gardens,” a curious poem that, on its denotative level, is about a weed. The teasel, Hecht tells us, is not found in Paradise. I know of no legends suggesting this, but then I know of no evidence to the contrary. The teasel in this poem is symbolic: it stands for the outsider.

He has not mastered the language; he still retains
A craving for some remembered native dishes;
These sorrowful foreign skies, all smoke and ashes,
Remain uncleansed by the pummeling winter rains.
...

His is a sad but not uncommon lot,
Familiar to border guards, to police and such.

The figure could well be the Wandering Jew, though even a botanical amateur would recognize that the plant of that name is unrelated to the teasel, which is here made to represent all outsiders in the plant world. Its human counterpart, the eternal refugee, is the true subject of the poem.

Hecht's procedure, then, is to proliferate detail in the service of a governing idea and to try, through various rhetorical techniques, to draw from the details an emotionally meaningful distillate. Sometimes the details take over, resulting in a poem that seems more impressionistic than forceful. In "Memory," for example, twenty-one blank verse lines recreate a scene in the fusty room of an old house, furnished with the impedimenta of an earlier generation:

The room contained a tufted ottoman,
A large elephant-foot umbrella stand
With two malacca canes, and two peacock
Tail feathers sprouting from a small-necked vase.

The durability of such a poem depends in part on the precision and evocativeness of the description, and in greater part on what is made of it – the emotional force the poet derives from this perception. In this case the perception is a momentary surge of feeling "on sunny days toward midsummer" when

The brass andirons caught a shaft of light
For twenty minutes in late afternoon
In a radiance dimly akin to happiness –
The dusty gleam of temporary wealth.

Much is left out here – the emotional meaning of the room for the observer, the family connection, if there is one, the extent to which the artifacts are more than mere antiquarian curiosities.

At other times, however, Hecht's blank verse achieves considerable tautness and energy. "Devotions of a Painter" is a *tour-de-force* of description, as it should be, since it aims to evoke the lushness of a painter's visual observations and of his canvas:

Weeds flatten with the current. Dragonflies
Poise like blue needles, steady in mid-air,
For some decisive, swift inoculation.

And in the persona of a painter, Hecht offers his credo as an artist – whether with paint or with words:

I am an elderly man in a straw hat
Who has set himself the task of praising God
For all this welter by setting out my paints
And getting as much truth as can be managed
Onto a small flat canvas.

Note the casualness of the meter here: each of the first three lines quoted has a quick extrametrical syllable tucked into the pentameter, while the fourth contains three syllables of such even stress that the sense of meter is momentarily suspended. This poem too does not rise to a climax, does not bowl the reader over by the force of its suddenly revealed connections among unlikenesses. Instead it turns on the force of a perceptive man's response to the physical world:

I am enamored of the pale chalk dust
Of the moth's wing, and the dark moldering gold
Of rust, the corrupted treasures of this world.

For many readers, that is a sufficient feeling and a sufficient truth.

Hecht's catholic learning is accompanied by a wide vocabulary and a broad stylistic palette. He can range from low to high speech in the same poem and often introduces unusual or arcane words, as in "The Witch of Endor" where we encounter *sortilege*, *thaumaturges*, and *engastrimythic* in the compass of fourteen lines.

In "Indolence" he plays with biblical diction ("corruption both of rust and moth"), steals a line from Whitman ("I loaf and invite my soul"), and displays a fine ear for sixties street slang ("blissed to the gills on hemp") – all in the first three lines. The poem concludes with the speaker (a stereotypical flower child) explaining that his indolence allows him to confer on passers-by "Consciences of a pure and niveous white." What is gained from the adjective *niveous* (snowy)? I confess I don't know. It lets us see that the poet's vocabulary very likely exceeds that of his protagonist, but that is a point that's hardly worth making. It might or might not save the line from banality. Nevertheless, the poem exhibits little penetration into the psychology of its subject. In the guise of a portrait, it comes across as a slightly superior scolding.

All these examples illustrate a central point: that learning and verbal ingenuity can add depth and interest to a poem but do not necessarily unite, even in the hands of a writer as capable as Hecht, in an object that can change the way a reader sees the world. Yet on occasion they do, and the result is a poem whose details and motivating impulse come movingly together. One such poem is titled with a quotation from the Psalms: "The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee":

Like trailing silks, the light
Hangs in the olive trees
As the pale wine of day
Drains to its very lees.
Huge presences of gray
Rise up, and then it's night.

Distantly lights go on.
Scattered like fallen sparks
Bedded in peat, they seem
Set in the plushest darks
Until a timid gleam
Of matins turns them wan,

Like 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.

Each of the six-line stanzas consists of a trimeter quatrain enclosed between riming first and last lines. The chime of each last line is thus a little fainter than the rime-endings of the preceding lines, and this faint but perceptible rime blends with the plaintive quality of the poem's argument.

The poem appears to deal with a commonplace: the quickness with which day ends and night supervenes. Everyone recognizes that this is a metaphor for human mortality. But the argument shifts: there are lights throughout the darkness, shining until morning. And the lights are like human beings who persist despite their frailty. The new day overwhelms them; its growing brightness only confirming their decline.

What is truly inimical is therefore not night but the new day that so outshines the "elderly and frail." The last stanza can be read on a literal level, without metaphor, but it is also a statement by a man at the end of his career, who sees talents emerging that may eclipse his own. The poem only partly rails at death; it also deplores the next generation – or rather the fact that there must be a next generation. That it does so with a dexterity and rhetorical control hardly to be matched by the poets now coming of age is a further irony that does not diminish either the writer's anguish or the force of his complaint.

First-rate poems like "The Darkness and the Light" are rare in Hecht's – or anyone's – work. The characteristic tone and shape of many of the shorter free-standing poems is a sort of dying fall, where power is achieved in the details, but the conclusion is a little off-handed. "The Ceremony of Innocence" is a good example. It describes an episode in

which a prisoner is brutally tortured and killed. Afterwards the torturers learn they have murdered the wrong man:

And this made one of them thoughtful. Some years after,
He quietly severed connections with the others,
Moved to a different city, took holy orders,
And devoted himself to serving God and the poor,
While the intended victim continued to live
On a walled estate, sentried around the clock
By a youthful, cell phone-linked praetorian guard.

And that's it. The focus of the poem at the end shifts to the man who avoided the victim's fate – apparently by being powerful and resourceful. There is an undefined sense that this avoidance is unjust, and there is an implication that the reformed torturer, while evidently troubled, got off too easily. But these are inferences derived from tone, not statement. We do not have a complete understanding of the situation, either intellectually or emotionally. The poem is presented with great suavity, but we sense something missing.

Yet this general subject – the arbitrary brutality the human race can visit on its own – has been the occasion of some of Hecht's most powerful poems. Indeed, it could be argued that, for all the brilliance of his lines, his most memorable and enduring poems will be those that grieve the sufferings of the Jewish people and other victims of human mercilessness.

Nowhere is this sensibility, and this power, better illustrated than in "The Book of Yolek," a sestina with an epigraph from the gospel of John: "*Wir haben ein Gesetz, und nach dem Gesetz soll er sterben.*" ("We have a law, and by our law he ought to die.") In the Bible that statement is attributed to "the Jews," but as an epigraph for this poem, and in German at that, it clearly applies to the Nazis who drove children to death camps. (Hecht, the most musical of poets, would have known the fugal setting of this line in Bach's *St. John Passion*.) Yolek, barely five years old and with bad lungs, was forced in 1942 to abandon his noon meal and take "that terrible walk" between armed guards. The sestina, with its key words recurring in ever-changing patterns, proves a fitting vehicle for this meditation, in which Yolek's fate plays on the mind of the writer, who concludes,

You will remember, helplessly, that day,
And the smell of smoke, and the loudspeakers of the camp.
Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.
His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.

Prepare to receive him in your home some day.
Though they killed him in the camp they sent him to,
He will walk in as you're sitting down to a meal.

In this constraining form, with a set number of lines and a vocabulary that must recycle six common words six times each, profligate invention is discouraged, and the maker is forced to work with limited resources. The result is unsentimental but emotionally direct and devastating, one of Hecht's most impressive achievements.

For all Hecht's native gifts, the short poem was not his most natural milieu. He did not gravitate toward the epigram, nor was he by nature an aphorist. But his strong inventive faculty and his innate musicality combine at times with a remarkable capacity for empathy to produce surprising results. Responding to the challenge of shorter forms, when he avoids the temptation to display erudition, and when he is moved by a situation in which he feels a personal stake, he is capable of poems that rank among the best of his age.