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Lending “A Shape to Water”: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht

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Abstract

Elegance and style are the most commonly recognised hallmarks of Anthony Hecht's poetry. This thesis argues that Hecht's poetry offers more than those features. Elegance is balanced in equal measure by the subject matter of his poetic inquiries, which both enlighten and inform readers. This subsequent balance creates poems of considerable contemporary significance. These poems ask questions that reshape our understanding of theodicy. Hecht's writing allows us the possibility of hope not in finding answers, but in the continued determination to search for them. He is a poet who (within his own writing style) innovates: revivifying dramatic monologues that deploy imagined characters who explore and ask questions of our human purpose. His lyrical poems are written with imagination, drama and are, in Horace's term, infused with delight. Through a study of these three aspects of Hecht's extant work, this thesis makes a further contribution to our understanding of the delicate balance required between Horatian *dulce* and our continued inquiry into what it is to be human, that is essential in the work of poetry.

Declarations

This is to certify that:

1. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated.
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.
3. This thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Anthony Hecht's Poetry: Lending "a shape to water."

Horace claims that poetry should add to our understanding of life and delight us:

*Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae
aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae.
Quicquid praecipies, esto brevis, ut cito dicta
percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles.
Omne superuacuum pleno de pectore manat.
Ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris¹*

(Horace 333)

Horace's advice is deceptively simple. He urges poets to inform, to bring fresh insight, revealing for the reader some perspective on our human condition, if not unspoken before, certainly in a way that reveals new understanding eudaemonically. Such insight cannot be divorced from delight or pleasure as they are integral to the poet's particular revelation. What is left unsaid is whether Horace means that this enjoyment may be derived from the subject, as well as from its composition. Both are required but, even if the subject matter is not joyful, pleasure can be derived from the insight the poem brings to its topic and from the dexterity with which language is employed. Relevance to life matters to Horace. That is how the listener or reader remains engaged. Horace warns against abundance without purpose or immediacy, as words matter and should not be used casually in poetry. Delight brings pleasure, but poetic expression must be wedded to informing our life. For Horace, poetry reveals and provides insight or understanding of how things are. For him, this insight is realised by achieving a balance between what and how a poet speaks.

¹ The aim of the poet is to inform or delight; to combine both pleasure and applicability to life. In instructing, be brief in what you say in order that your readers may grasp it quickly and hold it faithfully. Superfluous words simply spill out when the mind is already full. Fiction was invented in order to please, and should remain close to reality.

It was William Matthews' contribution to *The Burdens of Formality: Essays on the Poetry of Anthony Hecht* (1989), on Horace's influence in Hecht's work, that alerted me to the balance between Hecht's virtuosity, his subject matter and this exhortation by Horace which I have used to set the lens for this thesis. Matthews argues that Hecht's work is at its best when there is a balance between "at one extreme, a merely pyrotechnical art and, at the other, an obdurate thing so powerful that it beggars not only art but also the will to speak at all" (Matthews 157).

Before embarking further, though, I am cautioned about adopting a single focus. In *The Hidden Law* (1993), Hecht says he was reluctant to approach any collection of poetry with a prior agenda:

... all too often critical inquiries apply Procrustean methods, lopping off something here by cunning omission, labouring a point too heavily there, all on behalf of an a priori thesis to which the poet and his work are tortured into conformity. (*Hidden Law* 438).

For this reason, not all of Hecht's work is considered.² My focus does not provide a holistic definition of his contribution to poetry. Rather, I have chosen to consider particular elements of his work. First, I lay out the genesis of Hecht's style. I then proceed to map out the evident refashioning of his poetic heritage, tracing his style's development through three key concerns evident from his first collection to his last. I demonstrate how Hecht's approach altered over time through exploring these concerns. This inquiry will show the importance of the balance struck between the rich insights Hecht brings to the subjects he writes about, a command of poetic forms and an elegance in language that has rarely been matched. I test these claims through a close reading of Antony Hecht's poetry, concluding that his poetry achieves a balance between "superfluous words" and an "applicability to life" for the current era.

² The long poem, "The Venetian Vespers" for example, which is covered by Ricks in *True Friendship* (75-77) and Nims, in "The Venetian Vespers" (120-144) and in Post's *A Thickness of Particulars* (2015).

I have chosen to consider recurring themes in Hecht's work, which were realised initially through writing in the New Critical style of Tate and Ransom, in the influence of George Santayana's poetic theory and the poetry of Donne and Herbert, but later refashioned, making his inquiries into moral evil, human weakness and experience emerge in fresh, dramatic language. In exploring these themes, this thesis will extend the breadth of our understanding of his poetry, while acknowledging and responding to criticisms of the limitations of his formal approach.

This question of balance is a contemporary issue and therefore relevant to a consideration of Hecht's work. Jonathan F. S. Post, in his recently published book on Hecht's poetry, *A Thickness of Particulars: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, says on the one hand, that Hecht had a continued concern with formality in poetry, particularly in "the process of composition itself...in which an idea is coaxed into being by certain laws...yielding verse of a beautifully firm but flexible order" (14). My title of this thesis stems from a line in one of Hecht's poems, "The Plastic and the Poetic Form", which addresses the role formality may have in making a particular poem work. However he also adds that there remains "a creative tension at the heart of Classical Rhetoric: that while it valued the commonality of experience as poetry's subject, it understood that strangeness is often what dazzles and transports the listener" (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* xii).³ Hecht's acknowledged gift for dazzling words, *prima facie*, favours one side of this tension but may produce an imbalance. Post adds that his work on Hecht will hopefully "initiate or otherwise stimulate a critical conversation" on such matters as the balance between rhetoric and human experience in Hecht's work (xii). I propose to do just that, making deeper inquiries into the way the "tension" or balance works in some dominant themes in his poetry.⁴ To "lend shape to water" may also mean getting this essential balance right.

³ By "rhetoric" I take Post to mean that we should focus on that aspect of it now described as poetry. Also, I note he speaks of listening and would suggest that the same may be said of readers of the poems: who also are listeners.

⁴ Post's book follows on from his earlier publication *The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht* (2012). His book is, along with Hecht's interview with Philip Hoy entitled *Anthony Hecht: In Conversation with Philip Hoy*, the most comprehensive resource on Hecht's poetry post-1990. Along with Post and Hoy's contributions, there has been further interest with the publication of Ricks's *True Friendship*. All these contributions will be referred to later in the thesis.

Post also notes that comprehensive interest in Hecht's later work waned after 1989 (Post "Early Anthony" 205). Much of the pre-1990 critical analysis has a focus on Hecht's urbane style, in particular, *The Hard Hours* (1967). This thesis will attempt to go some way towards correcting this.

Chapter Two traces the foundations or genesis of Hecht's poetic style. This chapter concludes with an analysis of his critical writing on poetry and a consideration of the objections to his style. These objections haunted the critical reception of his work throughout his career.

In the final paragraph of *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), Jackson Bate points to a "dilemma" faced by all artists: "how to use a heritage, when we know and admire so much about it, how to grow by means of it, how to acquire our own identities, how to be ourselves" (Bate 134). I identify three interlocking strands that comprise Hecht's poetic heritage: the theoretical framework of the New Criticism, language's power to imagine ideal states in George Santayana's work on what poetry does,⁵ and the so-called metaphysical style of the seventeenth-century poets, particularly Donne and Herbert. All three strands place a premium on what Horace describes as the pleasure of finely wrought, elegant language.

Certainly, elegance of speech is a hallmark of poetry written in the New Critical style. David Perkins describes poets who wrote in this style, such as Wilbur and the early Hecht, as having specific qualities:

Usually their thought processes were rational, their grammar *comme il faut*, their forms self-consciously studied and rigorous in meters and stanzas. Their texture of phrasing was dense and active as they telescoped images and associations; they also pondered the interwoven network they were making. (Perkins 75)

⁵ For Santayana poetry is "an attenuation a rehandling, and echo of crude experience; it is itself a vision of things at arm's length. Language is made palpable and experience voluminous in poetry" (Santayana *Little Essays* 143).)

One issue was central for the New Critics: the value of the poem as a distinct form of knowledge. They claimed a specific poetic ontology.⁶ In *Essays of Four Decades* (1968), Allen Tate wrote that literature, and specifically poetry, provides a complete understanding of the poem's subject (Tate 105). According to Cleanth Brooks, form and substance cannot be separated (Brooks 72).⁷

Hecht's early poems such as "The Place of Pain in the Universe" and "Samuel Sewell", both published in *A Summoning of Stones* in 1954, bear the hallmarks of this style. On reviewing Hecht's first collection, Arthur Mizener commented that the poems therein show "him to be a poet of great charm", declaring him to have a "remarkable mastery" over this "period style" of poetry (Mizener 479). He did, though, flag a veiled concern that Hecht's witty style could get out of control and this may be the "fault of the style itself" (479). These poems are constructed like a set of well-crafted and carefully placed images, while metrical and rhyming patterns, along with these images, establish a richer picture or comprehension of the poem's subject through their interlocking construction and cross-references.

I will discuss, in some detail, "Samuel Sewell" in Chapter Two. Here I want to consider "The Place of Pain in the Universe" as an indicative precursor to that more extensive discussion of Hecht's poetic genesis in that chapter. The poem is in three sestet stanzas:

Mixture of chloroform and oil of cloves
Swabbed with a wadded toothpick on the gums
Grants us its peace by slackening the thread
Of rich embroidered nerve spun in the head,
And to the weak and wretched jaw it comes
Lighter than manna and in sweeter loaves.

An old engraving pictures St. Jerome
Studying at his table, where a skull,
Crowned with a candle, streams cold tears of wax
On its bone features for the flesh it lacks,
Yet its white complement of teeth is full
While all its pain runs happily to loam.

⁶ In Ransom's essay "Wanted: An Ontological Critic", he makes the following comment, "Poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition, it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct" (281). I have used that term in line with Ransom's own understanding of what the New Critical school claimed for poetry.

⁷ An extended explication of Brooks' position is considered in Chapter 2,

Observe there is no easy moral here.
 Having received their diet from the skies
 The teeth remain, although they cannot bite,
 And to perform inspection beyond sight
 The empty sockets famish for their eyes.
 The pain is lifelike in that waxwork tear.

(*Summoning* 15)

The pain in life captured in the first stanza's dentist's chair remains after death, as the body yearns to see, hear and eat but cannot. It is universal. This central thought is conveyed through a tightly wound rhyming pattern of a,b,c,c,b,a in each stanza. The rhymes have a mirror-image effect which balances the life/death contemplation in the poem. This structure also emphasises the couplet rhyme in the middle of each stanza: "thread", "head", "wax", "lax", "bite", "sight" contain the poem's essential proposition: pain is universal but better experienced in life than after death. The poem is unrelenting, moving from stanza to stanza, as is the constant and regular metre. There seems to be no escape in life or death from this pain.

For the living, a tooth extraction can be painful, and the first stanza suggests that such pain can be dealt with and the jaw's pain mollified with sedatives. "Peace" is granted by human intervention and drugs. Being alive means that action can be taken, if not to banish pain, then at least to lessen its effect. In the second stanza, rotting teeth are restored to a pristine if lifeless state, "white" and "full", but life's emotions are gone. Here, St Jerome is summoned, Doctor of the Church, a man who spent his whole life contemplating life after death and in paintings often depicted with a skull. The "cold tears of wax" that stream across the skull's surface usher in a world where pain is infinite and unrelenting. The final stanza takes the images of teeth and sight, key elements of being alive, distorting their purpose. Teeth "cannot bite". Forever fed by wax and sockets without eyes, they "perform inspection beyond sight". Pain is the universal constant with the image of teeth, and with the middle rhyming couplets threading the journey from the first to the last stanza.

It seems that to be alive with pain is far preferable to the pain that comes with death, where emotional connection to the world is extinguished, replaced by an unremitting void. There can be no resolution and “no easy moral lesson” to be learned. Pain’s stark, all-encompassing presence, hanging over life and death, plays out in the poem’s metrically tight stanzas and rhymes, which offer no relief. The poem’s continuous interplay between its structure or form,⁸ and its substance, its observations on pain, is crucial to the New Critical style so much admired by Ransom (279-81). Joseph Bennett described this poem in his review of *A Summoning of Stones*, as a “pure exercise...where all is craftsmanship held up for our admiration, and the subject merely a device, as in an étude of Chopin. Language is meant to be enjoyed” (Bennett 307). Getting the balance right between elegance and substance under the aegis of the New Critical style was a challenge. My discussion on “Samuel Sewell” will add further to this inquiry, demonstrating how it could have been done.

Robert Lowell, Hecht’s contemporary, also began writing poetry in the New Critical style. But by the time he was interviewed by Frederick Seidel in 1961, he had become deeply disenchanted with its tenets:

Any number of people are guilty of writing a complicated poem that has a certain amount of symbolism in it and really difficult meaning, a wonderful poem to teach. Then you unwind it and you feel that the intelligence, the experience, whatever goes into it, is skin-deep. (Seidel 69)

He struck out dramatically in 1959,⁹ fashioning a type of poetry commonly called “confessional” (Perkins 14). Hecht, in a much quieter way, over time, expressed similar doubts about the approach to poetry propounded by Ransom (*Melodies* 6). In Hecht’s case, the move away from New Criticism was more gradual and nuanced. I will argue, that while maintaining an association with formally structured poetry, he melded, refashioned and

⁸ By “poetic forms”, I refer to such structures/things as sonnets, villanelles and sestinas.

⁹ The first American edition of Lowell’s *Life Studies* was published in that year.

relaxed his writing style so that it became a dynamic sounding board producing, at its best, work that is emotionally and intellectually balanced.

If Hecht's beginnings lie with the New Criticism, then Santayana's claim that poetry is a particular type of intellectual experience also had an important role in his development as a poet. Santayana, in his *Little Essays*, contends that poetry cannot avoid being philosophical, theoretical and logically structured: the mind must be engaged in its writing and reading which, in turn, enhances its emotional impact (*Little Essays* 143). In "The Elements and Function of Poetry" (1934), Santayana claims that poetry has a distinctly idealist, platonic function, that reveals to humanity the possibility of a better self and society (273).

To explore these propositions and their influence in Hecht's work, I consider "Upon the Death of George Santayana" and "The Gardens of the Villa D'Este". In the former, Hecht interrogates Santayana's philosophical underpinnings, his secular humanism and platonic ideals. In this poem, Hecht rejects Santayana's idealist claims for poetry. In the latter, "The Gardens of the Villa D'Este", formality, elegance and plenitude of language which, according to Santayana, are so essential for the creation of poetry, are given full reign (Colapietro 564).

Santayana's influence has not been extensively explored in critical analyses of Hecht's work.¹⁰ In *Melodies Unheard* (2003), Hecht's last set of critical essays, he speaks about the importance of the intellect as being the handmaiden of any emotion inherent in poetry. This proposition is akin to Santayana's poetics. Santayana claims that poetry has a quasi-religious function, declaring that "the poet becomes aware that he is essentially a prophet" who portrays ideals and devotes himself "to the loving expression of the religion that exists" or "to the heralding of one which he believes to be possible" ("The Elements and Function of Poetry" 279).¹¹

¹⁰ Even Post makes only slight comment on Santayana's influence, making reference to him just twice in his latest book, *A Thickness of Particulars: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht* (24, 153.).

¹¹ At the conclusion of Shelley's essay "A Defense of Poetry" (1840) he declares:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehend inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets

Language is made “palpable and experience voluminous in poetry” (*Little Essays* 143). This is achieved through what Santayana describes as “euphony”, or the “sensuous beauty of words and their utterance in measure where speech as an instrument counts as well as the meaning” (Colapietro 564).

At its best, the intellect enriches a poem, driving the experience of heightened emotion or feeling. Hecht begins many of his later lyrics with a distanced proposition that is then both intellectually and emotionally explored: “The Deodand”, “The Cost”, “Peripeteia”, “A Birthday Poem” are such later examples (*Millions* 1, 21, 36; *Vespers* 6). Nevertheless, he is also cognisant of the pitfall of unnecessary words. Formal elegance can fail. His small poem entitled “Speech” attests to this doubt (*Summoning* 50). Words matter for Hecht, as they did for Santayana, though only when they are wedded to the fashioning of meaning within the poem, not merely to its architectural structure.

The writing style of early seventeenth-century poets, described as metaphysical, is the third foundation stone of Hecht’s poetry. It is not surprising that this is the case, as such poets¹² were writing poetry that was full of fresh ways of seeing the world or pushing the boundaries of formal invention. Hecht speaks of his debt and interest in this style in his interviews with McClatchy and Hoy (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 72, 87-88; McClatchy “Hecht” 34, 204). I treat the influence of the seventeenth-century poets on Hecht’s poetry separately from that of the New Critics, Ransom, Tate and Brooks. There are many similarities but in doing so, I want to emphasise the depth of Hecht’s genesis as a poet. His style has richer antecedents than his American teachers. I explore this influence in Chapter Five when discussing Hecht’s lyrical poetry after the publication of *The Hard Hours* which

which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley 57)

Shelley speaks of poets as the articulators or reflectors of wider “shadows” (Shelley 57). They articulate what has not been made patent but what is to come and fashion it. Poets articulate a narrative of the future, which through its creation fashions that future. This does seem to anticipate Santayana’s description of poets as the bearers of a religious experience.

¹² Notably, Donne, Herbert and Marvell.

demonstrates how he had moved away from a strict adherence to the New Critical style, but retained and enhanced his debt to seventeenth-century poets such as Donne and Herbert.

Central elements of this metaphysical style have been commented on by a number of critics when speaking of Hecht's poetic DNA and his lyrical poetry. To cover its contribution to the genesis of Hecht's style, I take his poem "At the Frick" and compare it with Donne's "Holy Sonnet VI", where two elements carry each poem's proposition and argument: the syntactical architecture and the use of particular images.¹³ To note the distinctions between this style and that of the theoretical tenets of Ransom, Tate and Brooks, I analyse Hecht's lyrical work in Chapter Five.

All of these influences, found in Hecht's early work, are important to his writing style. Some signatures of this poetic genesis remain with him from his first to his last collection, but, as will be demonstrated in succeeding chapters, elegance and formality were refashioned to great effect, with the balance between substance and style being paramount.

Hecht wrote a number of books critically analysing the works of others and on poetry in general.¹⁴ In Chapter Five, I also make the case that a careful reconsideration of Hecht's critical position on formal poetry reveals a complex relationship that, while beginning with New Critical tenets, changed over time, as did his poetry. Public identification as a writer of elegantly structured poems might be misread as his being adamant that there was only one way to write. True, for Hecht, verse units remained characters in a poem's drama, but it is clear in his interviews with Hoy, Baer and McClatchy and in his Mellon lectures that he was quite prepared to accept that this was not always the case (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 82; Baer 67; McClatchy "Hecht" 193-94; Hecht and National Gallery of Art (U.S.) 26). Other poets, he admitted, could write poetry in a different style with considerable effect. Personal preference or defence of a particular style of poetry, though, should not be confused with blind adherence. Moreover, when appropriate, his poems took on a more catholic approach

¹³ In Hecht's poem, the act of seeing and the image of light in the painting drive the poem. In Donne's the double word play in "joint" and "unjoint" has a similar purpose. Over time, Hecht's poetry was more influenced by the formal and pared down-elegance of Herbert than by the intellectual word play of Donne. This will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

¹⁴ See *On the Methods and Ambitions of Poetry* (1965), *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism* (1986), *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (1993), and *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (2003).

to formal structures. Examples of this, include “The Short End”, “See Naples and Die” and the third section of “Sacrifice” entitled “1945” (*Vespers* 9; *Transparent* 21; *Darkness* 36).

The conclusion of this chapter addresses the criticisms made of Hecht’s style: some critics did not think that Hecht got the balance right. This is a central ongoing concern that bedevilled his work. In *The Government of the Tongue* (1989), Heaney makes a similar observation to Post, when he describes formal poetic elegance in the following terms:

Classicism, in this definition, becomes the negative aspect of the Horatian *dulce*, a matter of conventional ornament, a protective paradigm of the way things are, drawn from previous readings of the world which remain impervious to new perceptions and which are deleterious to the growth of consciousness. (Heaney 52)

Heaney alerts us to the very thing Hecht’s poetry was criticised for: style overwhelming substance. B H Fairchild suspects that the use of the word “elegance” is a polite way of branding Hecht’s poetry as insubstantial (Fairchild 57). Nine years after Hecht’s death, Edward Mendelson complained about syntax that was too complex and contained an excessive use of adjectives (Mendelson 62). The polished language was distracting to Benjamin Markovits and Joseph Bennett (Markovits 8; Bennett 307).¹⁵ According to Madoff, elegance detracted from the reception of Hecht’s work (Madoff 188-90). But it was Donald Davie who made the most extensive attack. Davie regarded the poetry as being second-rate (Davie “Review” 43-44), and this clearly had an effect on Hecht (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 29-30). All these critics wonder whether elegance has not overwhelmed substance and the Horatian balance not been maintained.

The following chapters consider Hecht’s poems that tackle questions concerning theodicy¹⁶, his creation of dramatic character and the lyric, argue that these criticisms are not well-founded. I take these three major threads in Hecht’s poetry to demonstrate how the balance between style and substance which is central to his work’s success. Moreover, the investigation of these strands shows that his poetry, while retaining elements of his

¹⁵ Markovits’ comments were made in relation to a review of Ricks’ book *True Friendship* (2010). Ricks takes great care in uncovering the voices of previous poets in Hecht’s work with an emphasis on T S Eliot. Ricks’ book provides an insightful, intertextual analysis of Hecht’s work.

¹⁶ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz first used the term “Theodicy” in the following : *Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (1710).

Metaphysical and Santayanian foundations, becomes, over time, suppler, moving away, at times, from the formal approach of its New Critical beginnings. His work is more than elegant: it can be profound.

Chapter Three considers one of these aspects, demonstrating that Hecht used elegance of speech to explore one of the most important theological questions of modern times: if God is good, how can He allow moral evil? How could He have allowed the Holocaust to happen?

Hecht begins his long interview with Philip Hoy by speaking of his Jewish background:

I was born into an upper-middle-class family in New York City in 1923. My parents were of German-Jewish background, though born in America, as was their parents. The Jewish part of their heritage was something they felt awkward about: both proud and ashamed. The shame was the kind engendered by conventional anti-Semitism, and social ostracism experienced by virtually all Jews in a gentile society... (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 17).

He served in the 97th Infantry Division in World War Two and saw, first-hand, the inexplicable violence wrought by the Nazis upon his fellow Jews. He recounts to Hoy, the traumatic personal experience of being a Flossenbug liberator:

When we arrived, the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at a rate of five hundred a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to interview such French prisoners as were well enough to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp. Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges levelled against them, translating their denials or defences back into French for the sake of the accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible. The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years later I would wake shrieking" (26).

Further on in his interview he touches on how the war generated "an awed reverence for what the Jews of Europe had undergone, a sense of marvel at the hideousness of what they had been forced to endure. I came to feel that it was important to be worthy of their sacrifices, to justify my survival in the face of their misery and extinction,..." (28).

Hecht's personal horror in the face of the Holocaust is reflected more broadly by Theodor W. Adorno, who, in his landmark essay "*Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*" said: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And it corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (Adorno 26). These comments resonated with many readers after 1949, though some critics have claimed that the usual interpretation of the comments is misguided (Hoffman 182).¹⁷ Certainly, though, Hecht was conscious of Adorno's "dictum" (Hoffman 182). In a letter to Charles Tung, Hecht revisits this issue:

By way of contrast, though I never suffered like those who were prisoners in the camps, I did actually see one; and I need nothing to make it vivid to me. Secondly, except for Wiesel's Night,¹⁸ I have read no "literary" works about prison camps that seem anywhere nearly as effective as straight reportorial accounts, because the facts themselves are so monstrous and surreal they not only don't need, but cannot endure, the embellishment of metaphor or artistic design. Please note that I am not saying what Adorno so famously said: that after Auschwitz there can be no more poetry. The right answer to that is one Mark Strand offered. After Auschwitz one can no longer eat lunch, either, but one does. (*Letters* 263-64)

Hecht continued to write poetry and some of his most powerful work concerned the Holocaust and moral evil, more generally. Such poems can be found in *A Summoning of Stones*, *The Hard Hours*, *The Transparent Man*, and *The Darkness and the Light*.¹⁹

The Hard Hours, in particular, brought Hecht considerable critical acclaim, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1968.

¹⁷ Hoffman notes that this passage is "rarely quoted in full, from 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', an essay written in 1949, published in 1951 in *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit*. Leopold von Wiese zum 75. Geburtstag, and reprinted in *Prismen* in 1955" (182). He then adds "the bare statement of the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz has been and is being traded as 'Adorno's dictum' more widely than Adorno's actual verdict, that 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Support for this misreading has been derived from further instances in which Adorno refers to the impossibility thesis, for instance at the end of 'Die Kunst und die Künste', a talk given at the Berliner Akademie der Künste in 1966" (183).

¹⁸ You will note the underlining of the word "night", this is a direct transcription of how Hecht wrote his letter to Charles Tung.

¹⁹ From *A Summoning of Stones*, "Christmas Is Coming" (31); *The Hard Hours*, "Rites and Ceremonies" (38-47); *The Transparent Man*, "The Book of Yolek" (73-4); *The Darkness and the Light*, "A Brief Account of Our City" (19-21).

Chapter Three opens with a close reading of ““More Light! More Light!”” as it sets the template for the chapter’s areas of inquiry. Here, also, we find a very different exploration in poetry from his New Critical beginnings, involving a passionate and immediate engagement with the question: where does moral evil sit in our human experience? These poems are not distanced, nor are they intellectual, but face head-on one of the most significant of human nightmares. Hecht imagines and dramatically portrays a world where men deliberately indulge in acts of moral evil which are without reason or recompense. This serious engagement, not just at the personal level, is testing our commonly shared human values and beliefs. His poetry addresses the profound question: what if there is no salvation in the face of moral evil, if there is no God?

This poem ““More Light! More Light!”” is a significant break from the New Criticism, in that it signposts material outside the text with quotations and references that have been taken from Goethe (““More Light! More Light!””) and the executions of the “Oxford Martyrs”. It embodies a cinematic “jump cut” technique, but, most importantly, its subject matter is passionately expressed in riveting lines such as “No light, no light in the blue Polish eye” (this line is uttered when the Polish prisoner kills his fellow Jewish inmates) (Hecht *Hard Hours* 64). While maintaining an adherence to a formal stanzaic approach, it captures a shift from Hecht’s beginnings as a writer. The reader sees the appropriation of cultural references which enable the poem to work as hymns at a structural level²⁰ as well as in shadowing other texts.²¹ These qualities enrich his work, and will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

²⁰ Hecht appropriates hymn like metres within numerous poems including ““More Light, More Light!”” (*Hard Hours* 64); “The Room” and “The Fire Sermon” within “Rites and Ceremonies” (*Hard Hours* 38, 42); “Isaac” in “Sacrifice” (*Darkness* 35).

²¹ Hecht as well as referring to Goethe and the “Oxford Martyrs” makes reference to *King Lear* and sections of the Old Testament in “Rites and Ceremonies” (*Hard Hours* 38).

Another example of Hecht's shifting from a New Critical approach while maintaining a balance between structure and substance as a writer is the poem "Book of Yolek", which is written as a sestina.²² Sestinas are structurally complex indeed, a seductive trap for poets perhaps, a trap Hecht was all too conscious of, referring to this weakness in "Speech", where a "too easy eloquence" can lessen the poem's impact (*Summoning* 50).²³

In 1989, after the publication of *The Hard Hours* and *Venetian Vespers*, *The Burdens of Formality: Essays on the Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, edited by Sydney Lea, and Norman German's *Anthony Hecht*, were released; both are generous in their praise for Hecht's contribution to American literature (Lea; German).²⁴ They acknowledge the extraordinary elegance and formality of Hecht's poetry, with many of the essays collected in *Burdens of Formality* exploring issues of moral evil and the Holocaust, which I want to expand on here from a theological perspective (Lea xiv; German 49).

The collection of essays edited by Lea explores the concerns and subjects of Hecht's poetry, pointing out their engagement with the world beyond the self (Lea xiii). In the editor's words, though, the book's methodology led to a "disproportionate number of contributors" focussing on "the same few poems" (Lea xiv). The analyses cover three separate preoccupations: formality of structure in poetry as a means of dealing with calculated violence and evil; the reconciliation of life after "the fall" of man; and coping with the

²² "The Book of Yolek" from *The Transparent Man*, also combines formality with visceral memories of the Holocaust. Post analyses this poem at the beginning of *A Thickness of Particulars: The Poetry of Anthony Hecht*. Written as a sestina, it has been the subject of detailed and considered scrutiny by Post and Kenneth Sherman's "The Necessity of Poetry: Anthony Hecht's 'The Book of Yolek' Yolek".

²³ Sestinas comprise thirty-nine pentameter lines, broken into six stanzas of six lines each, followed by a concluding triplet. The structural cohesion of the poem is provided by the repetition of the last word in each line. The sequence in which these words must occur depends on their sequence in the preceding stanza. The word ending the last stanza must end the first line of the new stanza, the one ending the first line of the old now ends the second line of the new in strict sequence. The final triplet is structured as six-half lines. The words ending the first three lines of the last normal stanza appear in the same order preceding the caesuras in the three lines of the triplet, while the words ending the last three lines of the last stanza end the lines of the triplet. Hecht in "Sidney and the Sestina" takes up the challenge that perhaps such a form is all elegance and no substance. He acknowledges that the "sevenfold repetitions of the same terminal words does indeed invite monotony that best accompanies a dolorous, despairing and melancholy mood" but he then quotes Puttenham, the Elizabethan critic who described those who wrote in sestina form as "the makers of cunning", who may also be capable of producing "something that is acutely felt; markedly painful or pleasurable".

²⁴ German's work is a chronological survey of the poems in collections up to and including *Venetian Vespers*. They are not considered in any thematic grouping and so while useful in providing some textual insights, the book did not lend itself to the thematic work I undertake in this thesis.

Holocaust (Lea xiv). The intent of Lea's edition of essays is to demonstrate that, across all these issues, elegance has a purpose and enables the poet to manage the most difficult subject matter. None of the contributors discussed the collections published after *The Venetian Vespers*, which I will address by looking at the theological issues raised in Hecht's engagement with moral evil.

Most contributions in these essays begin with comments about Hecht's poetic elegance, and then explore particular aspects of his confrontation with the Holocaust. Kenneth Gross's contribution aims to highlight "the rage against loss, against cruelty, against pain; rage that can be self-authenticating or self-destructing" (Gross 159-60). J.D. McClatchy says of *The Hard Hours* that "darkness and suffering suffuse the book", and he wonders "if the book's many victims aren't projections of the poet himself" (McClatchy "Anatomies" 196). Formality is seen then as a coping mechanism that enables Hecht to plumb the depths of some of the worst aspects of life. That he uses it to tackle personal trauma, rage and melancholy in the face of evil manifesting itself as calculated cruelty in human experience, and still triumph, tells only part of the story.²⁵

Alicia Ostriker says in her contribution: "One can scarcely avoid noting of Hecht that his stanza patterns are ingenious and his blank verse supple, his learning classical and his milieu cosmopolitan, his language opulent and his wit charming". This impression is then systematically enhanced as she praises the work as having a consistent "moral edge"; far from being just a work of "literature", it is that of a "pedagogue and a moralist" as well (Ostriker 98).

²⁵ Within the collection of essays, Brad Leithauser identifies Hecht as a poet who grapples with "the forces of darkness" that seemed to define the twentieth century (Leithauser 3). Brodsky also describes Hecht's poetry as being "tragic" reflections on the state of the contemporary world (Brodsky 50). Edward Hirsch and Peter Sacks give attention to *The Hard Hours*, Hirsch describing it "as a masterpiece...of evil encountered in the various guises of history" (Hirsch 61). Sacks touches on one of my central inquiries: the comprehension of moral evil (Sacks 62). His contribution centres on "Rites and Ceremonies", which I have used and complemented in my theological inquiries of the same poems, as well as building on his insights when considering poems such as the trilogy "Sacrifice" from *The Darkness and the Light* in Hecht's last collection (Sacks 62). Hecht's formal mastery and eloquence are considered by Kenneth Gross, as Hecht uses them to channel the rage found in such poems as "The Deodand" and "Green: An Epistle" (Gross, 160,72). J.D. McClatchy's contribution illustrated the importance to Hecht of George Santayana, in his attempt to write "clear verse about dark things" ("Anatomies" 202).

It is Peter Sacks's contribution, though, that holds many themes of the other essays and is of most value for my purposes. Sacks develops a sustained investigation of the limits and uses of formal poetry, defining this formality as comprising the poet's mastery of "syntactic complexities and sinewy uses of paradox" which gives them a "tensile power as well as subtlety" (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 65). After a close reading of some of Hecht's more confronting poems and subjects, Sacks concludes that he "refuses to avoid his task and chooses to sing rather than to yield to a mute despair – this is his strength...And that the grave courage of his song should include such a deep attention to its own necessities of form and to the rightness of its sound – this is his art" (93). What is the purpose of this singing? I argue that more can be said, for Hecht's elegance is set in balance with deeper theological issues.

In "'No Room for Me': George Herbert and Our Contemporaries" Sacks also suggests, when comparing George Herbert's poem "Deniall" with the "Fire Sermon" from "Rites and Ceremonies", that for Hecht, unlike Herbert, there is no redemption (Sacks "'No Room for Me'" 41). Sacks and Ostriker seem to pinpoint a possible theological perspective, although Sacks seems to imply that in the modern world it is pointless. It is this perspective, however, that I believe warrants deeper investigation.

Chapter Three argues that Hecht is taking his poetic concerns into a dialogue on the nature of theodicy and palpable moral evil, a dialogue which is both deeply personal and fraught but also asks questions that are still relevant in the twenty-first century. This dialogue extends beyond his Holocaust poems. I am cautious about attempting to restrict all of Hecht's poetry to being a conversation with evil. Nevertheless, these poems are now the basis of his critical reputation.

Theodicy is canvassed by Hecht in *The Hidden Law* (48), as well as in interviews with Baer "Fourteen on Form: Conversations with Poets" (73) and *Anthony Hecht: In Conversation with Phillip Hoy* (58).²⁶ His poem, "More Light! More Light!", dramatic in its narrative, imaginative in the rendering of the English martyrs' deaths, the mind of the Polish

²⁶ As alluded to above, essays in Lea's book also touch on this aspect but perhaps do not follow up with a deeper theological exploration, being principally concerned with the way formal poetry manages to comprehend moral evil. Additionally, Lea's publication did not have the benefit of considering *The Darkness and the Light*.

executioner and the execution itself, throws down the gauntlet: how does one continue if there is no God? The poem's structure reflects Sacks' division between the God-believing world of Herbert and the Godless world faced after the Holocaust. This poem's imagination and drama are extremely different from the distanced intellectuality of his first collection. It is the springboard for the theological perspectives and possible answers to moral evil after the Holocaust that, I argue, lie behind some of Hecht's work.

The issue of theodicy in Hecht's work has recently gained critical interest. In "Socrates in Hell: Anthony Hecht, Humanism and The Holocaust" (2011), James Wilson addresses the question of humanity's purpose after the Holocaust and why Hecht's poetry may not be that of despair (Wilson). David Yezzi picks up a similar theme in "The Morality of Anthony Hecht" (2004) and Peter Sinclair in "Trauma and Prayer in Anthony Hecht's 'The Hard Hours'", addresses the question of theodicy (Yezzi; Sinclair). Sinclair maintains that Hecht abandons the New Critical use of form to play ironically against content but uses language in prayer in an attempt to understand moral evil (Sinclair). Prayer is seen as a dramatic rubric. Sherman also makes passing comments on moral evil and theodicy at the conclusion of his article on "The Book of Yolek" (Sherman 611).

These more recent commentators deny that despair and nihilism colour Hecht's poetry. With these insights in mind, I revisit key poems in *A Summoning of Stones*, *The Hard Hours*, and *The Darkness and the Light*.²⁷ What is revealed is a sophisticated inquiry into the apparent incomprehensibility of moral evil's existence with no salvation by an absent or non-existent God. The poems considered in this chapter confront the question: what is our purpose in the light of this absence, where evil is palpable?

²⁷ Notably "Rites and Ceremonies" (38), "'More Light! More Light!'" (64), "A Hill" (2), "It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It" (67) in *The Hard Hours*; "Sacrifice" (33) in *The Darkness and the Light*; "Japan" (10), "Christmas is Coming" (31) in *A Summoning of Stones*.

How Hecht searches for possible answers is elegantly framed in powerful, dramatic depictions of horror that are, partly, informed by the work of Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* and have a strikingly similar approach and affinity with Urs Von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 1. These theologians explore the question of theodicy and use dramatic and poetic re-imaginings of faith from liturgical, spiritual and ethical perspectives, that may continue to redeem, even in the face of radical evil.

Hecht refers specifically to the morally impossible choices that Søren Kierkegaard contemplates in his retelling of the Old Testament story of Isaac and Abraham (*Hidden Law* 48). How does one speak or ascribe a humanly comprehensible meaning to such events?²⁸ Two aspects of Kierkegaard's theology are relevant to my investigation of Hecht's work: first, his use of an actor or fictional character to speak poetically and imaginatively about choices bereft of a comprehensible ethical framework; and second, through that actor's speaking, the imaginative construction of an acceptance, a "leap of faith", encompassing these impossible choices, delivering an answer to the inherent contradiction between divine and human justice.²⁹

This confrontation is presented at times, particularly in "Rites and Ceremonies", in formal poetic sequences with highly-wrought dramatic rubrics³⁰; then, at other times, in a less formal narrative giving full range to imaginative retellings of history or scripture.³¹ It is this imagination with its capacity to generate possibilities in the face of our natural incomprehensibility or certain death that is central to Hecht's Kierkegaardian vision. The "leap of faith" is behind such lines as:

²⁸ Hecht revisits this specific incident in the poem "Sacrifice" in *The Darkness and the Light*.

²⁹ For an extensive discussion of these concepts, see Chapter 3 (95-98).

³⁰ I use rubrics in the religious sense, to delineate the elements marked out in the liturgy of the Mass

³¹ For example, the structure of the first stanza of "The Room" is taken as a psalm (Sacks "Rites and Ceremonies" 81), while the second stanza recalls the liberation of a concentration camp. Post has an extensive intertextual analysis of "Rites and Ceremonies" in *A Thickness of Particulars* (60-69), where he details references to Herbert, *King Lear* and Eliot. Also, Ricks, in *True Friendship*, discusses the "appropriation of the form as well as several lines of George Herbert's denial" in the final section of "The Fire Sermon" (73), and also speaks of Hecht's "unremitting engagement with Eliot" (75).

Listen, listen.
But the voices are blown away.

And yet, this light,
The work of thy fingers...

(Hard Hours 46)

In reading this, one is reminded of Balthasar's concept of a theo-dramatic performance at the heart of his reconciliation of divine and human justice. For Balthasar, divine and human freedom are central to the modern "problem of existence" (Balthasar 7). Evil plays a central part in the dramatic performance or acting out of Christ's death, descent into Hell and resurrection, where his suffering bridges the gap in comprehension between divine and human freedom. Christ engages with evil through his death, and this "theo-drama" speaks to our own attempts to comprehend why such evil is allowed to exist. The dilemma is stark. Human justice cannot constrain divine freedom nor can divine justice limit human freedom to act (Balthasar 7). Hecht confronts the question of our purpose when faced with our potential to do acts of moral evil: seemingly with the acquiescence of God that bears an affinity in approach with Balthasar's theo-dramatic explication of the same dilemma. This dramatic acting out in Hecht's poetry is in the ceremonial form of prayer:

Father, I also pray
For those among us whom we know not, those
Dearest to thy grace,
The saved and saving remnant, the promised third,

Who in a later day
When we are compassed about with foes,
Shall be for us a nail in thy holy place
There to abide according to thy word.

(Hard Hours 47)

What then of the gap or silence in between human freedom and divine will? In the third section of Hecht's poem "Sacrifice", entitled "1945", we witness a family traumatised into silence by their own actions in denying a frightened German soldier a means of escape:

There followed a long silence, a long silence.
 For years they lived together in that house,
 Through daily tasks, through all the family meals,
 In agonized, unviolated silence.

(*Darkness* 38)

Jacques Derrida in *The Gift of Death* (1996) and John Caputo in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (1997) have also tackled this conflict between divine and human justice, interrogating the nature of the silence that the gap between the two engenders. Abraham, for Derrida, is asked to work towards salvation in the absence of God (Derrida 57). For Caputo, God is no longer a basis of faith but rather one to be grasped, if at all, in doubt (Caputo *Prayers* 8). Because of this silence, we confess that we know nothing: there may not be “a great secret” that resolves the conflict between the two, but prayer itself keeps the possibility open that there may be salvation (Caputo *Prayers* 8-9). Hecht posits that there may be no God, only silence. For humanity, then, to seek or expect answers may be futile; but for Hecht, praying continues in hope, not nihilism.

Hecht’s poetry on moral evil places great emphasis on prayer,³² not with the belief that it might bring resolution, but with the belief that the acting out, in the formulas of praying, can enable a sort of human comprehension of moral evil. Hecht is using poetry to ask, dramatically and imaginatively, a fundamental human question. At its best, his is a critical intelligence that incorporates emotional resonances as part of the writing.

Having detailed Hecht’s foundations as a poet as well as outlining how he refashioned this palette of influences to confront theological questions about moral evil, I continue my argument in Chapter Four exploring further the substantial richness of his work. Here, I will demonstrate that Hecht developed and extended it beyond themes having a deeply personal dimension, such as the Holocaust,³³ by revivifying formal poetry’s capacity to

³² Notably, “The Room” and “The Fire Sermon”, in “Rites and Ceremonies” begin with a prayer (*Hard Hours* 38, 42). Similarly, the final stanza in “Isaac” in “Sacrifice” begins with a prayer (*Darkness* 35).

³³ In an interview with Hoy, Hecht recalls waking up screaming, and his stays in mental facilities (Hecht in *Conversation with Hoy* 51.).

create the stories of other imagined lives as applicable to our understanding of how we may have experienced life.

Apart from Post's recent studies, and Christopher Ricks' lengthy essay *True Friendship*, published critical interest in Hecht's later work has been restricted to reviews on the publication of collections rather than comprehensive thematic investigations.³⁴ This can in part be explained by the "paucity of poems"³⁵ after these years (Letters 205). In many respects, then, a sustained investigation of Hecht's work that involves the creation of fictional characters across collections has not been extensively undertaken.³⁶

Here, too, substance is balanced with elegance, its application intimately tied to the text's meaning. What is worth noting is the application of this balance to Hecht's creation of distinct, imagined dramatic characters central to a poem's impact as they explore aspects of human failure.³⁷ Again, my argument rests on a close reading of the poems themselves. This reading reveals a complex of voices in conversation, uses of time both as a metaphor and cinematically, sliding between past, future and present events within which, as readers, we are engaged in the dramatic action unfolding in the story. These characters live in this conversation where the rich language of Hecht's own voice is thrown, occasionally, into contrast with the actor's voice in the poems. This dialogue in language between created character and poet is partly the means through which the reader becomes an active participant in the story.

³⁴ See bibliography at the conclusion of Hoy's interview with Hecht (154 – 161).

³⁵ Between *the Venetian Vespers* and *The Transparent Man*, there is a gap of 11 years.

³⁶ The following articles were considered for the purpose of my study of Hecht's creation of dramatic character and narrative poems: James Panabaker, *Review: Transparent Man* (1992), Lachlan Mackinnon, *A Wordsworthian Gift* (1991), Joseph Brodsky, *Anthony Hecht and the Art of Poetry* (1989), Jan Schreiber, *The Achievements of Anthony Hecht* (2014) and Edward Mendelson, *Seeing is Not Believing* (2013). However as mentioned, there has been renewed interest in Hecht's Holocaust poems, particularly in relation to the question of theodicy they raise. For example, Peter Sinclair, *Trauma and Prayer in Anthony Hecht's "The Hard Hours"* (2012); David Yezzi, "The Morality of Anthony Hecht" (2004); James Wilson, "Socrates in Hell: Anthony Hecht, Humanism and the Holocaust" (2011).

³⁷ Notably, "The Grapes" (3), "The Short End" (9), in *The Venetian Vespers*, "Green: An Epistle" (14) in *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977), "See Naples and Die" (21) in *The Transparent Man*, "Death the Whore" (37), "Death the Hypocrite" (5), "Death the Painter" (29), "Death the Punchinello" (34), "Death the Oxford Don" (17) in *Flight Among The Tombs* (1996).

These poems were not without detractors, some claiming that Hecht had over-reached, his elegant style leading to what Horace warned against: mellifluous words without substance (Panabaker 252; Hecht *Letters* 234). Hecht admitted that he enjoyed using obscure words, to challenge the reader to be actively involved (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 73).³⁸

Judging by Hecht's reaction to those who levelled criticism at them, these poems are among his most contentious and brought into focus Hecht's own belief that some were misread and hence not given the serious scrutiny they warranted. Some literary commentators were unsure how successful they were (*Letters* 234).

Did the declared scope of the project fall short of its clearly stated goals and was the Horatian dictum for a balance between elegance and substance lacking? It is clear that for Hecht this was a deliberate project, made evident in his discussions with Hoy, where he speaks of his poems' misinterpretations (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 60).³⁹ With Gerber, Hecht declares that he wants to revivify the longer narrative form (Hecht, Gerber and Gemmet 8). This project is followed up more particularly in an interview with *Bomb* magazine where he complains that modern poetry has become limited to the poet's own experiences (Hecht, Anderson and Stephens 30). He abhors the reduction of poems to little more than self-reflexive moments in contemplation or emotional angst (30).⁴⁰ Hecht's dramatic monologues rest on the poems of Robert Browning.

³⁸ For example, in "The Grapes", Hecht writes "In nervous incandescent filaments" (*Vespers* 5) or in "The Deodand", "Swooning lubricities and lassitudes" (*Vespers* 7).

³⁹ When this matter was raised in his interview with Hoy, no specific examples were given by Hecht, although in his letter to Joseph Brodsky in relation to "See Naples And Die", a poem I discuss in Chapter 4, it is clear that he did despair at others' readings in some instances (*Selected Letters* 234).

⁴⁰ From my reading of these comments by Hecht (which I quote from more extensively in Chapter Four), his interest in revivifying the capacity for poetry to tell stories is neither as a narrative so defined by the OED, nor encompassed by the theoretical inquiries concerning narratology. In his comments, he uses stories and narrative interchangeably and I will adopt his approach in my discussion of his dramatic character poems in that chapter. As previously mentioned, Donald Davie damns Hecht's poetics with faint praise as being "Victorian". These comments were made in a review of *Venetian Vespers* from which many of his dramatic character poems come (Davie "Review" 43-44). There is no doubt that Browning's dramatic monologues had a considerable influence on Hecht's work. For my purposes, it is the involvement of the reader in these poems that is important, hence the acknowledgement of his debt to Browning. Stephanie Wortman succinctly sums up Browning's imagined and dramatic character creations when she says: "In its most exemplary form, the dramatic monologue indicates both a speaker and an auditor. It responds to a dramatic occasion, encompasses

Two such poems are Robert Browning's "Caliban Upon Setebos" and "My Last Duchess" (Browning 83, 292). The former, described by Browning as his most representative "dramatic" poem, depicts Caliban as having an embryonic conception of a higher and purer god, "The Quiet", and that religious belief may also be evolutionary, mimicking the natural world as proposed by Darwin (Browning 297; Browning, Wise and Hood 235). "Caliban Upon Setebos" has also been read as a scathing attack on the "a-moral character of the Calvinist God" (Tracy 489). What is startling in this first poem is the third person voice which has strong echoes of Gollum in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954):

'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not just choosing so.
Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
Shall join: the file, one pincer twisted off;
Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;
As it like me each time, I do: so He.

(Browning 296)

The second poem is a nuanced and malevolent monologue where the Duke's all-consuming narcissism and power presage death for any opposition. Nothing is more chilling than the final off-hand remark, which reminds the envoy of the implications of disobedience:

...Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

(Browning 84)

some action, and reveals the quality of the speaker as a character. Often the speaker is differentiated from the writer by name or other details in the poem" (Wortman 89-90).)

In both, the characters resonate through language structure and description. The “Say”, in “Caliban Upon Setebos”, has a sense of an omnipotent arbitrary choosing and carries implied wanton malice. This same malice and power is evident in Hecht’s “Death The Painter” in *Flight Among The Tombs*:

You lordlings, what is Man, his blood and vitals,
 When all is said and done?
 A poor forked animal, a nest of flies.
 Tell us, what is this one
 Once shorn of all his dignities and title,
 Divested of his testicles and eyes?

(29)

Conversely, the “me!”, in “My Last Duchess”, reinforces the Duke’s belief that all power is his to command and heightens the image of murderous consequences if he is crossed. Browning’s voice informs the direct address to the reader in Hecht’s “Death the Whore”, where language’s dramatic power is also evident:

As for the winter scene of which I spoke –
 The smoke, my dear, the smoke. I am the smoke.

(*Flight* 40)

Hecht’s poems centred on imaginative characters other than the author, driven through a dramatic narrative, are not only further evidence of his matching elegance with substance but also his move away from a strict New Critical approach. Now he employs his facility with language to explore a wider range of human experiences. This exploration is carried out through a diverse range of perspectives, both structurally and experientially in the creation of fictional characters. Certainly, the juxtaposition of direct speech in Hecht’s dramatic character poems with Santayana’s poetic theory’s emphasis on “euphony”, where language’s richness and variation is applied, adds to the dialogical quality of these stories. For example, in “See Naples and Die”:

One could make out in such brief intervals
 An endless beach littered with squirming fish,
 With kelp and timbers strewn on muddy flats,
 Giant sea-worms bright with a glittering slime,
 Crabs limping in their rheumatoid pavane.

(*Transparent* 34)

Or “The Grapes”:

And all those little bags of glassiness,
Those clustered planets, leaned their eastern cheeks
Into the Sunlight, each one showing a soft
Meridian swelling where the thinning light
Mysteriously tapered into shadow.

(*Vespers* 5)

Or “The Short End”:

A grizzled landscape, burdock and thistle-choked,
A snarled, barbed-wire barricade of brambles,
All thorn and needle-sharp hostility.

(*Vespers* 17)

In each of these examples, a richness of language conveys dramatic impact and emotional context to the reader.

Again, Chapter Four seeks to demonstrate the depth and reach of Hecht’s talent, where the poetic balance is realised in stories that are related through dexterity of voice, language idiom, and cultural references played out over time. In doing so he creates acute character portraits that speak directly to the reader as we observe their stories unfold. He never forgets the readers; they are part of the poetic drama as we witness the destruction of ideals of a marriage in “The Short End”, or indeed, how it must be not to have emotions at all, as with the protagonist in “See Naples and Die”. Poems such as “Green: An Epistle” or “Ghost in the Martini” take the concept of character creation into a psychological analysis of the self.

In the final chapter, Chapter Five, I consider the growth of Hecht’s lyrical work in his collections subsequent to *The Hard Hours*.⁴¹ In his lyrical poems, his association with a formal writing style needs reassessment, as his position is more nuanced, given a close

⁴¹ Specifically this thesis will consider, from *Millions of Strange Shadows*, “The Cost”, “A Birthday Poem”, “Peripeteia”, “The Ghost in the Martini”; from *The Venetian Vespers*, “The Deodand”; and finally from *The Darkness and The Light*, “Late Afternoon: The Onslaught of Love”, “A Fall”, “Sacrifice”, “Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-seven” and “The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee”

analysis of his own writing (*Melodies* 6),⁴² his interviews and later work, along with the intertextual elements in “A Fall”, for example. Elegance is matched and balanced with substance, enabling a more complex poetic style. What remains, though, in his lyrical poems, is the influence of two particular elements present in his early work, namely the work of the poets of the seventeenth century and the poetic theory of Santayana.

The first of these elements is the work of the so-called metaphysical poets, lauded by Herbert J. C. Grierson and T. S. Eliot (Grierson xv-xvi; Eliot *Selected* 283). Both speak of this poetry as having disparate images, complexity and obscurity, colloquial language and paradox: above all its “wit” or dependence on intelligence are commented on (Grierson xx, Li; Eliot “Metaphysical” 283). The metaphysicals also had their detractors, chief among them Samuel Johnson, who attacked them for using too much artifice and lacking emotional verisimilitude: being observers of, rather than participants in, what it was to be alive (Johnson 24). It appears that this type of seventeenth-century poetry suffers from similar accusations as those levelled at the New Critical style by poets like the later Lowell: all artifice and no emotion.

I argue, when considering the poems in this chapter, that Hecht refashions the metaphysical elements of his work, with his later poetry being more akin to that of George Herbert than to Donne. These poems demonstrate a more passionate involvement in life, but here again, his extraordinary command of formal structure is balanced and complements this involvement. What is of particular note is Hecht’s use of images of light, of sight and of the act of seeing, which draw the reader into the dramatic action of the poem. For example, in “A Fall”:

When at two p.m. the first shadows of night,
Formed by the massive shoulder of some slope,
Cast, for the rest of the day, entire valleys –
Their window boxes of geraniums,
Their cobbles, pinecones, banners and coffee cups –
Into increasing sinks and pools of dark.

(*Darkness* 15)

⁴² Hecht quotes approvingly from Richard Wilbur who claims that “a respect for reality makes a necessity of artifice” (*Methods* 502).

And similarly, in “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.

(*Darkness* 65)

And finally, in “Late Afternoon”:

In the purple sunlight
Like the surfaces of Florentine bronze.

(*Darkness* 3)

They deliver a powerful commentary on particular states of mind, emotions, and observations addressed directly to the reader.

If Hecht’s poetry changed in both style and scope, there were also constant signatures in his work, which Chapter Five addresses. George Santayana’s belief that poetry distills and orders crude experience in a way that allows us to think rationally about the emotionally fraught realities of being alive was important to Hecht (Wilson 147-48). For Santayana, words were directly integrated into meaning in poetry, having the capacity to bring a different mode of seeing to our experience (*Little Essays* 143). This care for language and how it could be made to enlighten the human experience remained in Hecht’s poetry from the first to the last collection. Of the three elements evident in the beginnings of Hecht’s work discussed in this thesis, Santayana’s influence is ever present - no more so than in his final collection *The Darkness and The Light*, where in “Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-seven”, language and metre act out a dance depicting the end of our lives:

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.

(*Darkness* 63)

Here the love of words and their capacity to hold both emotional impact and a deep philosophical proposition on what it is to be alive are melded together within an elegant, crossed-rhymed quatrain.

My hope with this thesis is to ensure that the reassessment started by Post's recent book on Anthony Hecht's work will continue. I seek to do this by highlighting how Hecht utilised his heritage to confront deep theological questions that are still pertinent today. His project was to revivify poetry that speaks in the voices of others, never losing sight of the reader as he critiques both our personal failures and our social values; and to refashion lyrical poems with technical finesse and deep emotional engagement.

Chapter Two

Hecht's Poetic Genesis

In this chapter, I map Hecht's poetic "heritage", arguing that while he began as a self-professed "'Childe' of the New Critics", his poetry is based on a more complex palette. Additionally, when considering his own writing on poetics, it is clear that his attitude to what makes poetry work was not always exclusively bound to a particular style. Over time, he developed a more catholic attitude to writing poetry in general. This chapter analyses the impact of Hecht's New Critical apprenticeship, then considers the influences of Donne and Herbert, and also the poetics of Santayana. Particular poems are considered in order to unpack the signature elements of his work. Finally, I will address the criticism, made by some critics, that his poetry is "full of adjectival filler" (Mendelson 62) or suffers from a "tenuous mellifluousness" (Madoff 190) where the "formal stylistics occasionally overpower the material" (Panabaker 252).

As an example of New Criticism's influence on Hecht's work, I begin by considering "Samuel Sewall", a poem from his first collection published in 1954 and entitled *A Summoning of Stones*, which contains many characteristics of Hecht's early style. The poem is constructed like a set of well-crafted and carefully placed "stones", where each element establishes a richer picture or comprehension of the poem's subject through their interlocking construction and cross references. The title of the collection is a quotation from Santayana's essay on Shakespeare (Santayana *Critical Writings* 139). In this poem, it is the "hearing" or "reading" of the text's elements, together with their culmination and counterpoint, that delivers the poem's impact.

The poem's protagonist, Samuel Sewall, was Harvard-educated and of wealthy parents. Sewall was a judge at the Salem witch trials, a notorious case of religious hysteria that caused catastrophic and uncalculated consequences. He publicly recanted his involvement in 1697, and wrote a pamphlet supporting the emancipation of slaves entitled "The Selling of Joseph" in 1700 (Britannica). He was widowed in his sixties and proceeded to court some

of the more prominent widows of Boston Puritan society, namely, Mesdames Winthrop and Gibbs.

Sewall kept a diary from the time he was at Harvard until his death, detailing the mores of his Puritan world. These diaries are a comprehensive first-hand account of New England "Society" in the seventeenth century. They are also an intimate record of one man's life. In the diaries, Sewall speaks of sharing wine and brandy with his female friends and of asking to hold the bare hand of a woman with whom he was smitten (Sewall 90-91). He was, for his time, a man of independent mind; prepared to stand apart from society but nevertheless involved and sustained by it.

This extraneous background knowledge is assumed to be known by the reader who is encouraged to work for the poem's meaning. This is a smart poem. The smartness is there for the reader to admire:

Samuel Sewall, in a world of wigs,
Flouted opinion in his personal hair;
For foppery he gave not any figs,
But in his right and honor took the air.

(Hecht *Summoning* 19)

The poem's formality reflects Sewall's life and puritan society. It is divided into heroic quatrain stanzas, similar to many Protestant hymns, and its meter is in iambic pentameters with a crossed rhyme that gives it a measured and restrained movement. Irony is used to create distance between ourselves, Sewall and his world. The last couplet in the first stanza has echoes of restoration comedy, with "flouted" and "foppery" both on accented stresses.

The rhyming pattern gives the poem a closed, polite sound and its metrical structure speaks of etiquette and placement. Each line's caesura in the first stanza divides comments of a general and a personal nature. The poem is seven stanzas in length, the number seven being of significance in Puritan exegesis. This measured movement of the lines enforces a tone of disinterested observation.

The first line establishes a sense of opposites and difference. "Samuel Sewall, in a world of wigs," has an opening dactylic foot, succeeded by anapaest and iambic feet. A caesura

separates the first two feet from the others. We are given the name of a man, Samuel Sewall, well known to those versed in American colonial history for his nonconforming reputation. Then there is the touchstone of a world where individuality in appearance is submerged in “wigs”. The caesura acts as a fulcrum for this tension between the man and his world. The opposites appear again in the next line between “opinion”, held by many, and the “personal”.

The second stanza sustains the same rhyme and metrical structure, balancing individual and society. The intimate character of the courtship of Madam Winthrop is also clear:

Thus in his naked style, though well attired,
He went forth in the city, or paid court
To Madam Winthrop, whom he much admired,
Most godly, but yet liberal with the port.

(Hecht *Summoning* 19)

The reference to his “naked” style and her liberality “with the port” echo Sewall’s more personal diary entries (Sewall 50, 188). There is also a whiff of wry humour in the largesse of the port’s distribution, and this humour will become one of Hecht’s more constant registers.

The third stanza details society’s observation and its approval that all the due courtship protocols have been observed. This is offset by the reference to the Puritan belief that man is part of nature and accepted as such. The stanza also captures Sewall’s personal pursuit of sexual happiness:

And all the town admired for two full years
His excellent address, his gifts of fruit,
Her gracious ways and delicate white ears,
And held the course of nature absolute.

(Hecht *Summoning* 19)

The fourth and fifth stanzas act as counter arguments, one resting on social acceptability, the other seeking to reveal the ways of God:

But yet she bade him suffer a peruke,
"That One be not distinguished from the All";
Delivered of herself this stern rebuke
Framed in the resonant language of St. Paul.

"Madam," he answered her, "I have a Friend
Furnishes me with hair out of His strength,
And He requires only I attend
Unto His charity and to its length."

(Hecht *Summoning* 19)

Madam Winthrop is, as suggested by her stressed epithet, a pillar of society and its conformities. These conformities are suggested by the suffering of a "peruke", the quotation from St Paul, and Winthrop's being described as "most godly". But Samuel's nonconformity rests on a higher authority: God. The use of the capital for "His", "He" and "Friend", all placed on metrical stresses, refers to a divinity perceived as intimately involved with the Puritans and with whom Sewall is on familiar terms. The poem concludes with a completion of Sewall's endeavours:

And all the town was witness to his trust:
On Monday he walked out with the Widow Gibbs,
A pious lady of charm and notable bust,
Whose heart beat tolerably beneath her ribs.

On Saturday he wrote proposing marriage,
And closed, imploring that she be not cruel,
"Your favourable answer will oblige,
Madame, your humble servant, Samuel Sewall."

(Hecht *Summoning* 19)

Having made his stand, these final stanzas refer to Sewall's decisive action. His diaries record his matter-of-fact approach to the Widow Gibbs, noting the negotiation with her sons to ensure that he was not encumbered with any of her late husband's debts (Sewall 266). This is reflected in the poem's matter of fact recording of the speed of subsequent events: "On Monday he walked out with the Widow Gibbs...On Saturday he wrote proposing marriage". The stanza also echoes Sewall's previously nuanced desire: Winthrop's "delicate white ears" and the description of Gibbs as "A pious lady of charm and notable bust". The last couplet paraphrases the letter of proposal Sewall wrote to Gibbs on 11th January, 1722 (Sewall 264). The formality of the metre fits well with the formality of the request, and the

poem ends as it began, with a proper name. The use of “Madam” reinforces the etiquette of the request, but in a softer rhetorical tone than previously.

This is a poem of great care and delicacy. The theme of an individual’s free will, in the context of social norms and accepted behaviour, is demonstrated on a number of levels. Hecht shows a detailed understanding of the historical figure and his society. The rhyming, metrical structure and shape of the poem, the underlying and delicate reference to sexual attraction as well as to the strict courting rituals of the Puritan world, are all in play. The poem articulates the limits of seventeenth-century Boston, but also recognises Samuel’s great personal, emotional drive by paying homage to his nonconformity. This delicacy is inherent in the formal structure of the language, framing, as it does, the emotional undercurrent. Samuel’s individuality is recognised but never spills over into an abandoning of the social norms of the day. He plays out his actions within context, just as Hecht plays out the poem within tight requirements of metrical and stanzaic forms. The poem’s structure itself asks us to consider these tensions between individual behaviour and social mores, and to engage in some understanding of similar personal frustrations in our own society. Interestingly, given future major themes in Hecht’s work, the laws of man are juxtaposed to those of God.

Hecht began his artistic life under the influence of the New Criticism, and his writing reflects its hallmarks. “Samuel Sewall” resonates with a close adherence to this school, particularly in its attempts to meld the meter with the irony and in its structural juxtaposition of personal story and social context. For all its formal brilliance, the worry might be that this poem is a theory template first and a poem second. Certainly, Hecht described the collection from which it came as the product of an “advanced apprentice” (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 43). I have already noted David Perkins’ description of poems such as “Samuel Sewall” as having specific qualities that adhere to a New Critical style (Perkins 75).

This polished style was promoted by Hecht’s teachers at Kenyon College. John Crowe Ransom, a poet and teacher, taught Hecht there and is, along with I. A. Richards, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, associated with the New Criticism.

What were the essential elements of this style?

A word of caution first. Attempts to categorize New Criticism as a cohesive movement can gloss over different emphases amongst its proponents. René Wellek, in his 1978 article *The New Criticism: Pro and Contra*, unpicks many of the misconceptions. He states categorically: “The view that New Criticism represents a coterie or even a school was mistaken” (Wellek 613). It would also be wrong, he continues, to see New Criticism as just “a new version of *explication de texte*” (Wellek 611).

Close reading, through the New Critical lens, asks for an active discrimination between poems. The aim is to achieve an understanding or interpretation of the text which is, as Wellek describes, “the other name for the now fashionable term hermeneutics” (Wellek 620). In his view, American critics such as James Huneker, Paul Elmer More, Van Wyck Brooks and Granville Hicks opposed each other on more than what they agreed on. These critics, according to Wellek, fall into four broad positions, aesthetic impressionism, humanism, critics of the “genteel” tradition, and Marxism respectively (Wellek 612, 14). For my purposes, it is the positions of the so-called “Southern New Critics”—Ransom, Tate and Brooks—that are of particular interest (Wellek 622).

Mark Jancovich describes these “Southern New Critics” as opposed approaches to literature that had an “emphasis on philology, source hunting, and literary biography” (Jancovich 204). He summarizes these critics’ stand as follows:

For all three critics, literary value could not be reduced to its rational content. Literature could not simply be assessed on the basis of statements it might make or the positions it might take. Indeed they argued that those forms of criticism according to content were merely symptoms of the rationality and abstractions of modern society, in which literature, like other forms, became valued for its utility. Moreover, they claimed that the value of literature specifically lay in its differences from, and even its challenge to scientific and rationalist discourses. (Jancovich 204)

One issue was central: the value of the poem as a distinct form of knowledge. The New Critics claimed a specific poetic ontology. Allen Tate writes in *Essays of Four Decades* that literature, specifically poetry, provides a “special, unique and complete knowledge” (Tate 104). He reiterates this point elsewhere, saying that poetry is “knowledge of a whole object, its complete knowledge, the full body of experience” (Tate 105). To suggest the

separateness of “form” – “as an object or vessel which contains meaning” - is mistaken (Jancovich 207).

Cleanth Brooks in, “My Credo (continued) V”, laid out the “articles of faith” he adhered to:

That Literary Criticism is a description and evaluation of its object.

That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity- the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts in building up this whole.

That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.

That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.

That form is meaning.

That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.

That the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.

That literature is not a surrogate for religion.

That as Allen Tate says “specific moral problems” are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.

That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carrying out criticism. (Brooks 72)

For Brooks, then, form and substance cannot be separated. This “Credo” is a startling proscriptive statement.

John Crowe Ransom adds to Brooks’ “Credo” that criticism is an attempt to “define and enjoy the aesthetic or characteristic values of literature” with regard to “particular works of art” (Ransom “Criticism”). For him, this is “a case of bringing into experience both a denser and a more contingent world, and commanding a discourse in more dimensions” (Ransom *New Criticism* 330). In his essay “Wanted: An Ontological Critic”, Ransom claims that poetry is a particular or unique form of expression distinct from “prose discourse” (Ransom *New*

Criticism 279). He then outlines what qualities makes up that “differentia” (Ransom *New Criticism* 279). He excludes “moralism” and “emotionalism”. The former can be easily expressed in prose, and the latter is considered as being “slightly disreputable” or as lacking “any special or definable content”, being identified only “by its capacity for teasing some dormant affective states into some unusual activity” (Ransom *New Criticism* 279).

Ransom claims that poetry is a “revolutionary departure from the convention of logical discourse”, that requires “a bold and proportionate designation” (Ransom *New Criticism* 280). This “designation” has two components: structure and texture. The first, “structure”, is the poem’s logical discourse. The second, “texture”, is the poem’s content that seems not to fit within that logical discourse (Ransom *New Criticism* 280). Texture is “any real content that may be come upon provided it is so free, unrestricted, and large that it cannot properly get into the structure” (Ransom *New Criticism* 280). For Ransom, texture is a “kind of content that distinguishes...poetry from prose” (Ransom *New Criticism* 280-81). It produces a unique “order of existence” or “a grade of objectivity that cannot be treated in scientific discourse” (Ransom *New Criticism* 281). He also insists that a poem’s metre, part of this texture, is “a peculiarly novel and manufactured form, and obviously a rather special unit of discourse” (Ransom *New Criticism* 284). It is the “technical use of language” (of which, I would claim, metre is one example) that “lifts words out of their symbolic or definitive uses into imaginative or image provoking uses”. Ransom proceeds to use the word “icons” to describe the mental images evoked (Ransom *New Criticism* 286-87). Care must be exercised here. For Ransom, an icon’s impact or reception is different every time it is used, and so it is not definable. For example, the image of “Prince Hamlet” is never used in quite the same way twice: each appearance of this image is different to the previous one. Ransom further speaks about “figures of speech” which:

twist accident away from straight course, as if to intimate astonishing lapses of rationality beneath the smooth surfaces of discourse, inviting perpetual attention, and weakening the tyranny of science over the senses. (Ransom "Poetry" 784)

The interplay or tension between “structure” (the logic of the poem) and “texture” (the icons, images and metre) as a continuous process is crucial for Ransom. Jancovich describes Ransom’s approach as arguing for the value of literary form:

[T]he literary text did not simply distract attention away from the rational content, but actually worked to undermine that content. It tested and challenged its apparent transparency, and so revealed those aspects of language which rational discourses (such as science) sought to control and repress. A similar challenge to rationality was mounted in the literary emphasis on the figurative aspects of language and in its use of tropes. (Jancovich 205)

Irony, as a linguistic form, is elevated to highlight the anti-scientific project of the New Critics. If New Critics were anti-rationalist, they also eschewed the explanation of poems through paraphrase. Meaning was inseparable from form.

The principles Ransom and Brooks lay out here, concerning structure, texture, metre, and image, all point to a new form of knowledge. At its heart, this knowledge is a “metre-and-meaning process” where metre and argument fight to displace each other and, within that very process, meaning is created, unable to be paraphrased. The form is integral to the meaning (Ransom *New Criticism* 295). Metre for Ransom and his New Critical associates is a disruptor of the apparent logic of the poem. Ransom even suggests that it is perhaps “the art itself” (Ransom *New Criticism* 295).

Ransom’s poem “Painted Head” also lays out New Criticism’s approach. Poetry, it claims, cannot work without both “head” and “body” being involved in the creation of art (Ransom “Painted” 107). Each stanza unpicks, in a calculated way, the errors that befall a head decapitated from “body bush” (Ransom “Painted” 107). Such a severance creates a “dark capital” without a “column” (Ransom “Painted” 107). The first stanza also questions the lack of the particular or concrete with its reference to a “platonic perhaps head...depending from nothing” (Ransom “Painted” 107).

The final stanzas are an affirmation of the metaphysical joining of body and head. This is a joyous union that is not one of two, but symbiotic and complete. As this fusion is described, images cascade, one upon the other. To this point, the poem lacks emotional engagement and is distanced, didactic, and irony is used to reveal the supposed nonsense of the Platonic

theory. In the final stanzas, though, the metre and images thrive and pulsate with life. The rock garden of the skull is clarified and made alive with the skin. Throughout, though, the poem never loses its didactic overtone:

The estate of body. Beauty is of body.
The flesh contouring shallowly on a head
Is a rock-garden needing body's love
And best bodiness to colorify

The big blue birds sitting and sea-shell cats
And caves, and on the iron acropolis
To spread the hyacinthine hair and rear
The olive garden for the nightingales.

(Ransom "Painted" 108)

"Painted Head" does explicate the theoretical position taken by the New Critics and what they thought should be the work of poetry. Historicism is rejected. Value is important and inherent within the text. Judgements are explicit. Poetic value is not scientific nor philosophical. Ironic observation drives the imagery, and the poem's "texture" and "substance" work well together.

As Perkins writes:

Ransom's poems appealed by the compactness and rigor of their forms, their impersonality, and perpetual surprise of their diction, and contrasting feelings and judgments they elicited. Much sensitive comment pinpointed their interplay of sympathy with detachment, seriousness with levity, sorrow and resignation before fate with bitter protest, and admiration and idealism with deflated realism. Sometimes it was claimed that his poems integrated these opposites...Even if it was not integrated, the speaker's mind was still valuable, for ironic tensions of the poem articulated his complex awareness. The poems especially corrected or criticized sentiment. (Perkins 105)

Ransom's conclusion about the centrality of metre is immediately recognizable in Hecht's poem above, as in a gentle ironic tone. "Samuel Sewall" elevates the dissonance between the logical flow, or structure of the story, and the texture provided by its tight quatrains, caesuras and iambic tetrameters, so making the form and meaning of the poem inseparable.

Ransom and Brooks are adamant about what constitutes literature and an intelligent reading of it. As a consequence, perhaps, there is a tendency for them to privilege form over function, disinterested contemplation over use or utility.

As his pupil, Hecht recalls that Ransom's prose "most nearly resembles the prose of George Santayana in its rhythmic and rhetorical elegances". He goes on in the same essay to say that he had been taught "to pay keen attention to poetic detail" (Hecht "Ransom" 380,83). The relationship between teacher and pupil was more than perfunctory; Ransom published one of Hecht's earliest poems in the *Kenyon Review* (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 34).

If "Samuel Sewell" reflects Ransom's New Critical dicta, the debt to him is also clearly demonstrated in Hecht's first critical essay, "On the Methods and Ambitions of Poetry" (1965). Hecht writes this at the moment of the New Criticism's apogee in academic circles. Formal structures in writing poetry are not a contested issue. It is assumed to be necessary, as Hecht says, for poetry to work: "this [poetry] is accomplished through technique" (Hecht "Methods" 490). He adds that formality for him is "two things":

...there is that sort of form which is determined by a well-told story, in which events occur not necessarily in their historical sequence but in a sequence which will have a dramatic effect...Poetry employs this sense of form which is essentially dramatic...The second kind of form...concerns meter, rhyme and stanza. (Hecht "Methods" 499)

In short, for Hecht, "form" is a structured way of writing along with a dramatic narrative. This dramatic dimension is taken much further than envisaged here, and I will discuss it in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Hecht quotes approvingly Richard Wilbur's claim that "a respect for reality makes a necessity of artifice" (Hecht "Methods" 502). Poetry's primary "weapon is words, used for the naming, comparison and contrasting of things. Its auxiliary weapons are rhythms, formal patterns, and rhymes" (Hecht "Methods" 502). Hecht uses the analogy of the Bach fugue to illustrate the "tedious" point:

The trained listener comes to identify each voice in its own right as it follows its independent existence in what seems a splendid and individual freedom; and yet, at the same time all in his mind as they move to oblige each other at every turn, and collaborate towards some end which all their richness of proliferation will justify. (Hecht "Methods" 502)

Poetry, Hecht suggests, can work by delighting our faculties “with brilliant and moving concatenations of effects” (Hecht "Methods" 502). Emphasis is placed on achieving this through “the rendering of the substantive particularity of the diverse elements that compose our world” (Hecht "Methods" 491). Hecht writes about the *haecceitas* of the poetic concern, as reflecting the concept in Dun Scotus which speaks of the immediate and essential quality or unique attribute of an object, noting that such an approach provides a sense of its individuality but also highlights contrasts between words within a poem (Hecht "Methods" 491). Syntax and diction are important because words have their own life, which a poet employs for different effects (Hecht "Methods" 505).

In Hecht’s analysis of George Herbert’s poem “Prayer”, praise is given to the juxtaposition of the last two plain and abstract words of the poem with the “highly charged concretions of metaphor” that precede them: “Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul’s blood, // The land of spices, something understood” (Hecht "Methods" 494-95).

A further point is made: it is the juxtaposition of the words creating a new meaning which is important. These words are allowed to be held in our mind “simultaneously, without cancelling each other out” (Hecht "Methods" 495). The modulation of tone carries the impact: “tone may modulate dramatically within a single poem, affording astonishing transitions and effects which seem to declare some tentative correspondences between the most disparate parts of experience” (Hecht "Methods" 493). For Hecht, the strength of a metaphor lies in the fact that “it links two otherwise incommensurate and discontinuous realms of discourse in a revealing and persuasive way” (Hecht "Methods" 497). In this respect, he speaks of formality in a similar way to Herbert Grierson’s description of what he describes as “metaphysical” poetry. Writing in this style, or as Perkins would say, in the poetic style of critical intelligence, is evidence of formal poetic structures and a metaphysical style closely aligned.

It is difficult to read Hecht's statements on these issues separately. He slips between using the words "formal" and "form" as though they were one and the same. My suspicion is that form for him meant the metaphysical elements of poetry, those images and dissonances that capture something beyond paraphrase, and formality meant its metrical, stanzaic and rhyming framework or texture. Hecht, in 1968, does not want to separate the two since he believed that they could not be disaggregated. All these comments reflect the New Critics' insistence on the inseparability of meaning, form and irony.

Hecht understands the theoretical demands of the New Criticism and in return he expects an intelligent, active engagement by the reader to unpack the poem's import via the technical, historical, philosophical and emotional elements contained in it. Hecht commands technical skills to a great degree. "Samuel Sewall" exemplifies this with its light and gentle punning on the hypocrisy of genteel society, but also through its quiet questioning of whose law is the most important, God or Man's.

As I have noted in Chapter one, Jackson Bate points to a "dilemma" faced by all artists: "how to use a heritage, when we know and admire so much about it, how to grow by means of it, how to acquire our own identities, how to be ourselves" (Bate 134). As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, Hecht augmented this New Criticism heritage in a particular way.

Along with New Critical emphases, though, there are two further elements evident in Hecht's early writing, which inform his work and enrich his poetry. They are his debt to George Santayana's poetics and the "metaphysical" style associated with such poets as Donne, Herbert and Marvell. If Hecht's beginnings lie with the New Criticism, then Santayana's claim that poetry is a philosophical "mode of experience", and the reworking of the sensuality of ideas admired in so-called metaphysical poetry (Colapietro 568), are also evident from his first collection to his last. Both these elements add depth and scope to Hecht's work.

J. D. McClatchy describes the structure of Hecht's early work as being an "intricate trelliswork" that shows "feats of engineering not seen since the seventeenth century" (McClatchy "Anatomies" 187). The term "formal"⁴³ could certainly be used to describe this, but we can build on this observation. Hecht's technical brilliance is matched by deeper explorations that will be discussed in the following chapters. Drama and imagination are signatures of his poetic palette as well as a constant dialogue between thought and emotion. How, then, are these elements played out in Hecht's work?

The significance of the quotation Hecht used as the title for his first collection, *A Summoning of Stones*, should not be underestimated. As mentioned, it comes from Santayana's essay on *Hamlet* where he writes:

We may observe in general that Shakespeare's genius shines in the texture of his poems rather than in their structure, in imagery and happy strokes rather than in integrating ideas. His poetry plays about life like ivy about a house, and is more akin to landscape than architecture. He feels no vocation to call the stones themselves to their ideal places and enchant the very substance and skeleton of the world.

(Santayana *Critical Writings* 139)

For Santayana, Shakespeare's genius does not sit well with his theoretical conception of poetry and, it would seem, is different from that of the early Anthony Hecht (Major 77).⁴⁴ Over time, though, Hecht adopts a more fluid and organic poetic style whilst retaining some elements of Santayana's poetic theory.⁴⁵

Santayana contends that poetry cannot avoid being philosophical, theoretical and logically structured, as it signifies a "steady contemplation of all things in their order and worth". He argues that "the life of theory is not the less human or less emotional than the life of the senses: it is more typically human and more keenly emotional" (*Little Essays* 143). As

⁴³ For the purpose of this thesis, I have used "formal" to describe Hecht's poetry. I have done so to acknowledge his use of rhyme and meter rather than pigeon-hole his poetry into a particular school. As the reader of this thesis would be aware, Hecht's verse incorporated a more flexible approach to writing. For example, the various sections in *Rites Ceremonies* (38-47) where formal verse a more relaxed style is evident .

⁴⁴ Santayana later changed his opinion of Shakespeare. See Santayana, "The Censor and the Poet" (1922).

⁴⁵ Hecht too, was influenced by Shakespeare. Post dedicates a whole chapter to tracing this influence, in his recent book, *A Thickness of Particulars*, entitled: *Shechtspeare* (Chapter 7).

Vincent Colapietro states, for Santayana, theory “is a form of life, and...philosophy [in poetry] refers to a level and mode of experience” which is “marked by its intensity and humanity, and is distinguished by its striving to frame a comprehensive yet nuanced vision of the natural world” (Colapietro 554). To object to philosophy in poetry would be like objecting to words, as words are also symbols without the sensuous character of the things for which they stand. For Santayana, poetry is “an attenuation, a rehandling, and echo of crude experience; it is itself a vision of things at arm’s length. Language is made palpable and experience voluminous in poetry” (Santayana *Little Essays* 143).

This is achieved through what Santayana describes as “euphony”, or the “sensuous beauty of words and their utterance in measure where speech as an instrument counts as well as the meaning” (Colapietro 564). A poem cannot be paraphrased without a loss of meaning. The second element required by Santayana in poetic language involves “the choice of coloured words and rare elliptical phrases” which he describes as “euphuism” (Colapietro 564). This use of words for him is intended to fissure or break apart linguistic habits, generating unforeseeable effects. This quality is akin to, but not the same as, the irony much sought after by proponents of the New Criticism. I would describe it rather as the inherent lusciousness of some words or phrases.

Santayana’s third aspect is experiential immediacy which is “the articulation of an experience for the sake of deepening, intensifying, understanding, and simply feeling with adequate vitality a moment or course of experience” (Colapietro 561). The final element Santayana considers is described as poetry’s “rational imagination”, that is, “an imagination tutored and tempered by experience”, a means through which we can accept the realities of being alive (562). In short, he says that poetry “is speech in which the instrument counts as well as the meaning and is the metrical and euphemistic discourse expressing thought which is both sensuous and ideal” (564). This is a deeply Platonic position because the forms, as well as the words, are important and integral to the meaning. This position also sits well with New Critical tenets.

A summation of Santayana's poetic theory is to be found in "The Elements and Function of Poetry". Santayana here argues that poetry has a quasi-religious function, declaring that "the poet becomes aware that he is essentially a prophet" who portrays ideals and devotes himself "to the loving expression of the religion that exists" or "to the heralding of one which he believes to be possible" (Santayana "The Elements and Function of Poetry" 279). He writes that:

The great function of poetry...is precisely this: to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. Our descent into the elements of our being is then justified by our subsequent freer ascent towards its goal; we revert to sense only to find food for reason; we destroy conventions only to construct ideals. (Santayana "The Elements and Function of Poetry" 273)

I am uncertain how Brooks would respond to Santayana's reference to poets as "prophets" or to his writing about a "religion that exists". These references do not fit well with his dictum: "literature is not a surrogate for religion". Certainly, to stand back and observe life, our personal and commonly held life experiences, even at their most depressing, through the lens of particular examples, is integral to Hecht's approach to poetry. It is a signature of his poetry that intellectual ideas and human ideals are tested through a poem's particular subject. I will expand on this claim further after completing my observations on Hecht's poetic heritage in the poems discussed in later chapters.

Hecht, along with Wallace Stevens and Robert Lowell, acknowledged Santayana's influence. All three dedicated poems to him (Stevens 508; Lowell 155-56). "Upon the Death of George Santayana" captures Hecht's philosophical debt as discussed above, interrogating Santayana's secular humanism and its validity within a religious context:⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Secular humanism is not theistic and does not accept supernatural views of reality.

Down every passage of the cloister hung
 A dark wood cross on a white plaster wall;
 But in the court were roses, not as tongue
 Might have them, something of Christ's blood grown small,
 But just as roses, and at three o'clock
 Their essences, inseparably bouqueted,
 Seemed more than Christ's last breath, and rose to mock
 An elderly man for whom the Sisters prayed.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 56)

Religious symbols are scattered through the stanza. Prayers could be equated to roses, which are a metaphor for Christ's blood. But the iambic foot at the beginning of the fifth line denies any attempt to consider this interpretation because, for Santayana, they can only be just flowers. Nevertheless, their "essences", a distinctly immaterial description, rise to mock the dying man. The irony in using "rose" as a verb, driving the association of "Christ's breath" with the flower, but also as a noun, inseparable from their physical nature, gently questions Santayana's philosophy as do the nun's prayers. There is a balance established, a duality if you like, between the material and immaterial world.

Santayana frequently gave sympathetic voice to the traditions of Christian Platonism in his literary criticism (Kuntz 282-97). He was, however, wedded to a materialist universe where ideals were built upon choice grounded in our aesthetic sensibility rather than obedience to a moral law or religious predisposition. Here is beauty, represented symbolically by the rose that the Christian faith offers, but this rose also "mocks" the old man for his inability to accept the faith that it embodies. The rhyming pattern of the eight lines adds to these contrasts. The empirical constraint of time, "o'clock", is tied to "mock", "bouqueted" with "prayed", sustaining a dissonance between physical and spiritual dimensions.

The second stanza continues to question the certainty of Santayana's position:

What heart can know itself? The Sybil speaks
 Mirthless and unbedizened things, but who
 Can fathom her intent? Loving the Greeks,
 He whispered to a nun who strove to woo
 His spirit unto God by prayer and fast,
 "Pray that I go to limbo, if it please
 Heaven to let my soul regard at last
 Democritus, Plato and Socrates."

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 56)

Certainty gives way to questions, and an unknowing heart sets off the nagging doubt hanging over the stanza. The Sybil, part of the classical milieu that Santayana would claim as his own antidote to religious conviction, stands apart. Her pronouncements are open to misinterpretation, and human motivation may not be truly known.

A compromise is sought. "Limbo", a place peculiar to Catholic theology before Vatican II, is his refuge. The very solution Santayana suggests to preserve his materialist humanism is fraught because of its religious overtones. Again and again in this portrait, Santayana is asked to confront the possibility or otherwise of something more than moral good and truth detached from a religious context. The third stanza depicts Santayana receiving his wish, only to be disappointed to find that Alcibiades, an Athenian general of great beauty, is not there:

And so it was. The river, as foretold,
 Ran darkly by; under his tongue he found
 Coin for the passage; the ferry tossed and rolled;
 The sages stood on their appointed ground,
 Sighing, all as foretold. The mind was tasked;
 He had not dreamed that so many had died.
 "But where is Alcibiades," he asked
 "The golden roisterer, the animal pride?"

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 56)

Beauty is crucial to Santayana's arguments on poetry and his philosophical framework. Alcibiades was a fraught individual. The Athenian general's daring and beauty were the stuff of legend; when Socrates fell in battle, he protected him against all assailants. Later the young man attempted to seduce Socrates; a man reputed to be of great physical ugliness,

but one of the greatest minds within the Western philosophical tradition. His attempts failed. Socrates was indifferent to earthly beauty in his pursuit of beauty itself. Beauty, uncoupled from a higher platonic concept, was not true beauty and again Santayana's philosophical position is questioned (Plato 218e). The poem keeps demanding something more of Santayana's humanism that is not within its secular, moral or ethical propositions. The retelling of Alcibiades' life demonstrates Santayana's philosophical fault line. This retelling also feeds directly into Hecht's own predicament and that of other New York Jewish intellectuals as they grappled with what our human purpose might be after the Holocaust (Wilson 148).

Thucydides and Plutarch record that Alcibiades' beauty was coupled with an irresistible but mercurial personality (Plutarch 258-90; Thucydides 249-51). He was a key protagonist in, but also responsible for the Athenians losing, the Peloponnesian War, leading the ill-fated expedition to Sicily. Alcibiades betrayed Athens, Sparta and other city-states in turn in order to survive. He scandalised public morals by committing sacrilege against the Eleusinian Mysteries. He was unrestrained and violent in his pursuit of his own ambitions: a truly malevolent Puck. Plutarch makes the moral point, in his account of Alcibiades, that power and violence might have a much greater impact on shaping history than truth and justice. This proposition is deeply ingrained in Hecht's poetry. Plutarch describes Alcibiades' ignominious end at the hand either of his political enemies or the brothers of women he had seduced, who torched his home and then pursued him, killing him in a volley of arrows. Even then, they did not wish to take Alcibiades head on, for fear he would defeat them.

The final stanza depicts a world full of doubt, shying away from the claims for secular humanism championed by Santayana:

These sages who had spoken of the love
And enmity of things, how all things flow,
Stood in the light no life is witness of,
And Socrates, whose wisdom was to know
He did not know, spoke with a solemn mien,
"He whom I loved for what he might have been
Freezes with traitors in the ultimate pit."

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 56)

Ugliness speaks the truth. Socratic doubt is elevated to the position of ultimate wisdom. The final lines are a trenchant rejection of physical beauty. There is a natural pause in the middle of lines two, four, five and six, building momentum to the finality and gravitas of Socrates' final address. The most seductive of all, sexual allure, embodied in Alcibiades, is bankrupt for it has no moral anchor.

Dante assigned traitors to the ninth circle of Hell (Dante 9.31-34). The beautiful Alcibiades joins them, betraying Athens and Sparta in turn and consorting with the Persian nemesis. Ironically, applying Santayana's concept of "euphony" in the final couplet leaves us in no doubt as to the failure of Santayana's thinking. This couplet questions the redemptive claims for beauty made out in his book *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante and Goethe*, where he holds Dante to be of the first rank (Santayana *Philosophical Poets* 5). Beauty is not enough: there must be more. As Wilson cogently remarks about this poem: "Santayana's humanism is based on materialism, building a beautiful culture on the void; the humanism that emerges from this poem concedes that it must be built upon and in the shadow of aboriginal violence, treason and blood" (Wilson 147). The events of the Holocaust had, for Hecht, made this the case. *The Hard Hours* finally abandons the belief that Santayana's secular humanism, and beauty are enough to cope with the horrors of genocide.

We see here some of Santayana's philosophical beliefs tested and found wanting. But the careful construction of argument in outlining the poem's subject and the importance of "euphony" and "experiential immediacy" as qualities in his language, remain with Hecht throughout his creative life (Santayana Interpretations 251). In *Melodies Unheard*, published in 2003, forty-nine years after *A Summoning of Stones*, he takes a Giles Fletcher poem and contracts the lines from pentameter to tetrameter:

If sad complaint would show my pain
Or tears express my troubled heart
If melting sighs would pity gain
Or true elements but ease my smart...

(Hecht version)

If sad complaint would show a lover's pain,
 Or tears express the torments of my heart,
 If melting sighs would ruth and pity gain,
 Or true elements but ease a lover's smart...

(Fletcher original; (Hecht *Melodies* 4)

Hecht says that although the sense of the poem remains, his reduction in the number of feet destroys the original's "authority", "dignity and "music". He adds: "It is often held that fixed forms invite and indeed encourage, prolixity", but "when there is no demand for any specified number of syllables, superfluities can be easily spotted and eliminated ...one of the most common blemishes of weak formal verse is its shameless collapse into padding" (Hecht *Melodies* 4-5).

These statements seem contradictory. Is Hecht in favour of prolixity or does he prefer metric discipline? I argue that Hecht is trying to distinguish in both cases a possible lack of discipline in the way poetry is written. In this example, a specific syntax is argued for as it enhances the emotional impact of the poem. The reader should not then assume that Hecht endorsed a blind adherence to formal structures. He makes a further point about "styles of feeling" inherent in poetry, listing such things as "conventions of morality, of political correctness, of intellectual attitudes" along with their "diagrammatic opposites adopted in militant rebellion" which are "as compelling in their conventionality as are heroic couplets" (Hecht *Melodies* 5). He asserts that what "counts in poetry" since the Romantic movement "is feeling, and this becomes more pronounced as time advances into modernism and postmodernism" (Hecht *Melodies* 5). He quotes with approval Jacques Maritain's observation that "poetic knowledge proceeds from the intellect in its most genuine and essential capacity as intellect, though through the indispensable instrumentality of feeling" (Hecht *Melodies* 5).

These comments are similar to Santayana's criteria of poetics, with their emphasis on the contribution that formality can, at its best, make to a poetic text, as well as the importance of conveying the experience of heightened emotion or feeling. Nevertheless, he is also cognisant of the pitfall of unnecessary words. Formal verse can fail. Words matter for Hecht,

as they do for Santayana, though only when they are wedded to the fashioning of meaning within the poem, not merely its architectural structure.

"The Gardens of the Villa D'Este" appeared in *A Summoning of Stones* and *The Hard Hours* (Hecht *Summoning* 35; *Hard Hours* 91). This poem is, as Post would claim, "the fullest single expression...of a belief that poetry should reflect the 'unsimplified plenitude' of actuality" (Post "Early Anthony" 113).⁴⁷ There is no question about the "techne" of this poem:

This is Italian. Here
Is cause for the undiminished bounce
Of sex, cause for the lark, the animal spirit
To rise, aerated, but not beyond our reach, to spread
Friction upon the air, cause to sing loud for the bed
Of jonquils, the linen bed, and established merit
Of love, and grandly to pronounce
Pleasure without peer.

(Hecht *Summoning* 35)

In the first and eighth lines, the metrical and rhyming structure mirror each other as does the second to the seventh, third to the sixth and fourth to its equivalent. The stanza "breathes" as it expands and contracts from three feet to six, then back to three. Lines three and four in each stanza rhyme, which, along with the repeating active voice of the verb "cause", drives and reflects the pulsing water of the garden's fountains. This is a very structured artifice. This artifice sits well in the bucolic genre of poetry, which is referred to in Hecht's later collection of essays, *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* (1992), in the chapter, "Paradise and Wilderness" (67-94). Post also notes the first publication in the *New Yorker* where the "poem was presented in parallel columns with the final (odd-numbered) stanza placed at the bottom, exactly in the middle, thus appearing to resolve the dialectic" between nature and art (Post "Early Anthony" 114).

More than just observation, there are people in this garden who indulge in the "undiminished bounce /Of sex". This is a nocturnal playground filled with pleasure as we

⁴⁷ Post refers to this poem in relation to Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" and Hecht's long standing interest in Marvell's poetry (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 23).

hear, “Cor mio, your supports are much too tight”, and where the gardeners restore charm and order in the morning; returning the “diamond earrings to the villa” (Hecht *Summoning* 38). This drama is juxtaposed to the formal movement of the lines, but it is here that “lurks/The wood louse, the night crawler, the homespun/spider; here are they born and wived/and bedded” (Hecht *Summoning* 36).

In the fifteenth stanza, we retreat from the garden and the poem conducts a dialogue between aesthetic and earthly delights:

For thus it was designed:
Controlled disorder at the heart
Of everything, the paradox, the old
Oxymoronic itch to set the formal strictures
Within a natural context, where the tension lectures
Us on our mortal state, and by controlled
Disorder, labours to keep art
From being too refined.

(Hecht *Summoning* 38)

Up to this point, the poem is a statement of balance between wilderness and paradise. The poem is more, though, than a distanced balance of form and emotional substance so that one reflects and enhances the other, or between intellectual and animal instincts. In the sixteenth stanza, the poem takes a decidedly Audenesque turn with the direct address to “Susan”. The address is suddenly immediate and personal.

I am not convinced, though, that the final stanzas work as effectively as they might in turning the philosophical and emotional gaze to a here-and-now emotional engagement. The unnaturalness of the stanzaic structure sits uncomfortably with the personal approach. The poem turns into too much homily and not enough affection: “let them signify that here//are more than formulas, that age sees no more clearly//For its poor eyesight,” (Hecht *Summoning* 39). Nevertheless, this approach of initially setting out the intellectual premise of a poem’s subject is one that we see in later poems, such as “A Birthday Poem”, where it is handled with much greater effect (Hecht *Millions* 21). Also, the cinematic cross-cutting technique effectively used in Hecht’s later poems begins here. The sensuousness of the

language and the elliptical phrasing sit squarely in the Santayanan poetic framework. The highly wrought, and intricate rhymes and meters are as much the product of the influence of Santayana as anything else.

Yet simply to emphasise the structure and techniques of Santayana's poetic theory sells Hecht's adoption of them short. He is well aware that technique can be hollow, that getting a balance between style and substance was paramount. This is perhaps why we find an ambivalence in one of the smaller poems in the first collection entitled "Speech", which did not make it into the selection of the poems reprinted in *The Hard Hours*. I will quote this poem in its entirety:

I have discouraged that in me
 Wherewith I most advance:
 Too easy eloquence of speech,
 A sailing present tense;
 Fearing that if the mind conspires
 Mainly to please the lip
 Time will point out the flattery,
 The language will not grip.

But when the talker's sleight of tongue
 Required us to laugh,
 Proving the agile, unrehearsed,
 Triumphantly pays off,
 The praise was for a kind of art
 Whereof there is no school;
 There the unlettered instinct rides
 In all its bodily skill.

(Hecht *Summoning* 50)

Post mentions this poem and reflects on how Hecht developed an aversion to "unlettered instinct" (Post "Early Anthony" 112). "Speech" is an acknowledgement of his weakness for "easy eloquence". There are lingering doubts about there being only one way to write. Indeed, what might be regarded as a "sleight of tongue", which elicits "laughter" can also ride with "skill", and can be produced in many ways. This perhaps is the reason why the criticisms that his poems did not get the balance right and were more style than substance were so hurtful: Hecht was all too aware of his own weakness. That such an admission is

made within a delicately metered stanza, should also not be ignored. Alternative poetics are complementary, not diametrically opposed.

This poem also has direct Renaissance antecedents: Jonson's "A Fit of Rhyme against Rhyme" and Herrick's "Delight in Disorder" (Jonson *Complete Poems* 166; Herrick 54) where they discuss questions of the balance between form and substance. Hecht seems, in this poem, to be well aware of his, and no doubt others', facility with words: a "Too easy eloquence of speech" could be a downfall, he suggests. The dangers that attend such a gift are also acknowledged: "the language will not grip". The poem's stanzas articulate the required delicate balance between artifice without substance and the "praise" warranted when "unlettered instinct rides/in all its bodily skill". Hecht is technically gifted; he is also aware that techne without the "laugh", without emotional engagement, makes the finished product hollow: a point made by Santayana. Hecht allows for either poetic approach, so long as it does elicit that metaphorical "laugh". "Praise" should be given to "a kind of art/whereof there is no school", for there is no definitive right or wrong, as the reader's response will tell you. Over time, Hecht's own style, documented in the introduction to *Melodies Unheard*, changes and the shift is, in part, because of the life-long conversation between reader and poet (Hecht *Melodies* 6).

The precise formal architecture of the poems in *A Summoning of Stones* was loosened in later collections. This small poem captures the beginning of a poetic journey as much as it plays the intellectual game of "on the one hand and on the other". How Hecht extended his debt to Santayana, using euphony and imagination, will be explored in later chapters. I want though to complete my analysis of Hecht's debt to metaphysical poetry first, as both elements are intertwined.

I will argue on the basis of his criticism and interviews, when discussing his approach to poetry, that Hecht's supposed aversion to freer poetic style was not as whole-hearted as many of his supporters would have us believe or his critics claim. This aversion was much more nuanced. Hecht made willing exceptions and was perhaps referring more to what suited him than to what made a particular poem work.

At the conclusion of McClatchy's lengthy interview with Hecht, Donne and Herbert are mentioned. Of the former, Hecht remarks that he "was one of my first literary enthusiasms and I would still like to be able to write a poem as powerful, as energetic, as dense and full of intelligence, of passion as many Donne has written" (McClatchy "Hecht" 204). Of Herbert, Hecht comments: "he invented most of his own forms, his utterances in this sense is nearly unique, and his music singular"; he adds that Herbert is one of the exemplars of a "great age of formal invention, of setting new limits" (McClatchy "Hecht" 34). It does not surprise that this is an "age" that holds some attraction for Hecht. It is the setting of new limits evident in their work that encourages Hecht to look to them for inspiration. How, then, are these new limits to be addressed in his work?

The central elements of the so-called metaphysical style have been commented on by a number of critics. Dryden, in his letter to the Earl of Dorset, pointed to its distinctiveness as possessing "nice speculations of philosophy" even in amorous verses where "nature only should reign" (Grierson xx). While he criticised this style, John Dryden was nevertheless cognizant of its central dynamic. He noted the "wit", which is akin perhaps to the more contemporary concept of the smart argument, and the erudite thinking. He noted the combination of dissimilar images, complexity and obscurity, colloquial language and paradox, argumentative form and content that worked like a dramatic monologue (Grierson xx). This intellectual play brought the outside world into the poems through metaphor, image, reference or argument. Johnson also noted the tendency to distort verse patterns (Grierson li). In his essay on Donne, Herbert Grierson writes that what makes the poetry metaphysical is the constant dialogue between feeling and thought (Grierson xxviii). T. S. Eliot speaks of the "telescoping of images and multiplied associations", which, at its best, saw the "idea and the simile become one" (Eliot "Metaphysical" 283), and surmises that this quality of subsuming thought into feeling was subsequently lost (Eliot "Metaphysical" 285, 88). At the heart of this definition is the capacity to turn ideas into sensations and of transforming an observation into a state of mind. In Eliot's words, "to Donne thought was a feeling" (Eliot "Metaphysical" 287). This quality, frequently discussed by Hecht in relation to his own work and that of other poets, is discussed below.

This approach to writing poetry is demonstrated by Grierson both from within the text and from its context. Seventeenth-century poetry was inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit within it, at a time of considerable social, philosophical, religious and political upheaval. This is echoed in John Donne's poem "A Verse Letter to Sir Henry Wotton" (2006):

The new philosophy calls all in doubt
The element of fire is quite put out
The sun is lost and no man's wit
Can well dissect him where to look for it.

(Donne 125)

Donne lived in a world where the "old" was being swept away. Luther, Galileo and Copernicus had seen to that. In the introduction to his book *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (1958), Grierson singles out the key spirit of this style of poetry, labelling it "Metaphysical". It is poetry

which...has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence. These poems were written because a definite interpretation of the riddle, the atoms of Epicurus rushing through infinite and empty space, the theology of the schoolmen as elaborated in the catechetical disquisitions of St. Thomas, Spinoza's vision of life *sub specie aeternitatis*, beyond good and evil, laid hold on the mind and the imagination of a great poet...revealing to him in the history of his own soul a brief abstract of the drama of human destiny. (Grierson xiii)

Grierson speaks of "drama" as being alive to the human condition and the "imagination" to comprehend it (Grierson xiv-xv).

As we will see, the Holocaust was both a personal and social violation of all that seemed humane for Hecht. His response is to use heightened drama in his poetry in an attempt to comprehend imaginatively what lies beyond personal understanding. Musing on what a metaphysical sensibility might be like in the twentieth century, Eliot writes: "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity...The poet must become more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect to dislocate or force language into his meaning" (Eliot

"Metaphysical" 289). In Donne, as in Hecht, there is a continuous dialogue between the personal and the history of their time: an acute awareness of a world in disintegration as much as of one in harmony.⁴⁸ The poetry of critical intelligence rests heavily on this so-called metaphysical sensibility. For some reason, the "wit" of Donne, Marvell and Herbert is the element most mentioned. But perhaps we are dealing with more.⁴⁹

As Grierson points out above, these poets endeavoured to comprehend the rapidly changing world by adopting a new style of language to describe it. Santayana's poetic philosophy and the indicators of this "metaphysical" poetry are very much two sides of the same coin. Thus, in now moving to considering Hecht's poems that reflect these elements, I will run the discussion of them in tandem.

"At the Frick" was not reprinted in *The Hard Hours*, presumably because Hecht did not consider it worthy (Hecht *Summoning* 51). This poem does, however, contain the clear modes of thought and poetic practice that are discussed above and that are evident in his later work. It heralds Hecht's lifelong interest in ekphrasis, which he revisits with Leonard Baskin in *The Hard Hours*, *Flight Among The Tombs* and finally in poems that are published in *The Darkness and the Light*.

Bellini's painting, *St Francis in the Desert*, is the inspiration for the poem. Hecht would have been familiar with this painting since it is part of the Frick Collection in his home city, New York. The painting is replete with religious symbols and depicts the moment when the saint receives the stigmata during a religious retreat outside La Verna. The painting's technique is precise, with an extraordinary sensitivity to nuances of colour and light. Bellini manipulates the oil medium to create a deeply communicative work of religious devotion. The stone blocks of the painting echo the title of the collection in which the poem first appeared.

But there is something more in this poem than its commentary on Bellini's painting. The poem displays processes of deliberation wedded to technical dexterity and in doing so, exhibits a type of approach reminiscent of Santayana's insistence that poetry and

⁴⁸ I discuss this matter in Chapter Five.

⁴⁹ Eliot's comment above referring to the modern world has relevance to the rapidly changing world of the Seventeenth Century.

philosophy are closely aligned. The poem also shows a considerable debt to the intricate word play of Donne. The opening stanza reads:

Before a grotto of blue tinted rock
 Master Bellini has set down St Francis.
 A light split through the Apennines to lock,
 Counter, and splice man's painful doubleness,
 Else he could weakly couple at the belt
 His kite mind to his cloven nether parts
 That seek to dance their independent dances.
 The sudden light descending came to bless
 His hands and feet with blisters, and to melt
 With loving that most malleable of hearts.

(Hecht *Summoning* 51)

The lines are a consistent pentameter with variations of iambic, anapaestic and trochaic feet. A rhyming pattern works though the 1st/3rd, 2nd/7th, 4th/8th, and 5th/9th lines. These formal patterns reflect the placing in the painting of religious iconography, which would have been well-known to the Renaissance viewer. The skull, book, town, hare, birds and shepherd all have their own theological significance. The artistic depiction of these emblems is deliberate, as is the poem's prosodic framework. The rhyming of "rock" and "lock" in the first and third lines suggest a poem of a fixed moment. The consistent five-foot lines are married with varying rhythms and reflect the duality Hecht contemplates while seeing the painting between "kite mind" and "cloven nether parts" which have "their independent dances".

The transfiguring light binds the painting's subject and poem together. The tree bends away from the beams of light in the painting, whereas in the poem the light "splits" the figure of the saint. Light also has a physical impact; its beams signal and reveal the stigmata as an event. The first stanza also fixes a moment in thought. The text invites meditation, calling on the reader to consider and look at this painting in much the same way as the call to "consider the lilies of the field". It is distinctly Hecht's interpretation, when he refers to

sunset rather than the painting's sunrise. Light is the call to think and focus on one thing or moment, and that spotlight generates a kaleidoscope of instantaneous revelations.

Light, motes and a stillness of gaze run through Hecht's poetry from the first collection to the last. Here, light becomes the incorporeal element tying the spiritual and temporal worlds with the doubleness of the net that "catches" fish and lets "through" light; both nouns have a double significance that is unified in the final line.

The second stanza explores the revelation:

Birds in the trees his chronicle recite:
How that God made of him a living net
To catch all graces, yet to let through light.
Fisher of birds and lepers, lost in thought
Darkly emblazoned, where the oblivious mule
Champs at the grasses and the sunset rusts
The hilltop fortress, where the painter set
Heron and rabbit, it was here he caught
Holiness that came swimming like a school
Of silver fishes to outflash his lusts.

(Hecht *Summoning* 51)

The stanza works like a Jesuit Spiritual Exercise. We consider both a moment in the saint's life and, with care and precision, the consequent contemplative detail. This is a moment of pure ecstasy, fusing the spiritual with the temporal. Rhymes work to highlight and fix the dual nature of this contemplation. The intangible "thought" is physically "caught", and animal tongues bear witness to this event, reciting and articulating the ecstatic "light". Moreover, the inevitable passing of the physical world's powerful forces is figured in "rusts" and "lusts". Verbs of physical action animate an opposite noun. The stanza revolves around metaphysical questions of "what is there" and "what is it like"?

The words' architecture achieves a balanced moment of reflection between man and ecstasy. This architecture informs the reading and illuminates the meditation of St Francis' gift of speaking to animals, heralding a spiritual event. The net catches holiness, a most intangible thing, with the image of "fisher of men" adding intertextual weight to the "silver fishes" that "outflash his lusts". The text establishes its own iconography beyond the paintings in a dialogue with St Francis' life. He is the net catching both the natural and the

spiritual world. In painting and poem, “light” runs through the spiritual and temporal landscape. What is observed in the painting, what Hecht takes from it as meditation are, to this point, fixed within the frame of the artwork. The third stanza strikes out from this:

Now I have seen those mountains, and have seen
 The fawn go frozen on the road with fear
 Of the careening autobus, the sheen
 Of its dilated eyes flash in its head
 Like glass reflectors, and have seen the trees
 As green as ever where their branches thresh
 The warm Italian winds of one more year
 Since that great instant. The painter’s dead
 Who brought the Doge and nobles to the knees
 Of the wind’s Brother Francis in the flesh.

(Hecht *Summoning* 51)

This is a changed location and context, moving from a distanced to immediate recollection. A vivid memory with an edgy threatening tinge replaces the serene observations at the Frick, where everything has its place, and there is a place for everything. Meditation has consequences. Transforming moments are not just framed on a wall for the delectation of the cognoscenti. The memory here is transfixing like the stigmata, but in fear and possible death. The image of light remains with “seen” and “sheen”, but now reflects emotional pressure and animal fear; a living response to the autobus’s palpable danger. In the darkness, the fawn is caught through its eyes’ response to the lights of the bus. The danger of this light harkens back to the suddenness of the stigmata and also the dual nature of the saint. Ecstasy is coupled with a heightened apprehension of death and makes death palpable. Revelation can bring fear as much as joy, for violence, too, is a moment of heightened awareness in and of life. The painter may be dead, but the wind’s Brother Francis is alive, on the road as a harbinger of a violent end to life, just as the same wind transfigures life in the painting. The final line’s first anapaest foot weighs on the “wind” that blows both in the painting and on the Alpine road. This moment resembles the moment that is referred to by Auden; it moves, “is invisible, // And does not smell” (Auden 415). What is it like, this “wind” of ecstasy and fear?

On reflection, Hecht considered technically adroit poetry such as this to be “jaunty and distant” (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 43). Certainly Richard Wilbur in his review of the collection, which appeared for the *New York Times Book Review*, hinted at this, and the accusation was levelled again by George Hemphill in *Anthony Hecht’s Nunnery of Art* in 1962; but this poem does not let controlled formal architecture drown out the meditation (Wilbur 12; Hemphill 163-71). Yet the poem does capture preoccupations that run throughout Hecht’s later work, such as a metaphysical approach to poetics, the ekphrastic mode, poetry as a deliberate act, the image of “light” as a stillness of gaze and, finally, the recognition of violence held in check by a formal approach. The categorisation of Hecht’s poetics as formal, whether or not that is too much of a gloss, and Hecht’s far more nuanced attitude to being labelled as such, will be covered later. While Perkins “boxes” these texts as examples of the “critical intelligence” school in modern poetry, this identification perhaps does not give due weight to Hecht’s metaphysical antecedents which are firmly rooted in a tradition that goes back to Donne (Perkins 75).

With *At The Frick* in mind, consider *Holy Sonnet VI* by John Donne:

This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimages last mile; and my race
 Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
 My spans last inch, my minutes last point,
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
 My body, and Soule and I shall sleepe a space,
 But my’ever-waking part shall see that face,
 Whose feare already shakes my every joynt:
 Then as my soul to heaven her first seate takes flight,
 And earth-bourne body, in the earth shall dwell,
 So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
 To where they’are bred, and would press me, to hell.
 Impute me righteous, thus purg’d of evil,
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devil.

(Donne 179)

While “At The Frick” is a poem of observation and reflection and Donne’s sonnet an active request for salvation, there are similarities in the architecture of the argument’s thesis behind each.

In Donne's poem, the rhyming of "unjoint" and "joynt" reinforces both the intimate physical realities of death and the separation of soul from the body. The verb describes the moment of separation, while the noun grounds the fear that such an instant evokes. The rhyming of these 5th and 8th lines encloses the couplet that speaks of the actual separation of body and soul, and the consequent "space" that allows Donne's soul to see God's "face". The separation permits the reception of a new metaphysical reality in that recognition. The technical architecture severs body and soul. The sonnet's final sestet, where the separation is described, depicts the natural consequence of death where souls are free to ascend into heaven and the body, with all its inherited faults, is buried. The dual nature of man is resolved.

Similarly, in Hecht's poem, two features are doing the "heavy lifting" in relation to the poem's propositions and argument: the syntactical architecture and the images of light that run from the painting to the to the autobus' headlights. These features are startling in their abutment within the text. They provide that essential quality associated with this type of poetry, a combination of dissimilar images, complexity and obscurity, colloquial language and paradox, described by Johnson, Grierson and Eliot. As Eliot says: the "heterogeneity" of the "material is compelled into unity by the operations of the poet's mind" (Eliot "Metaphysical" 283). "At The Frick" manages a similar approach where the central proposition is balanced around different images of light shifting from the divine stigmata to the life-threatening lights of the bus. What is different, though, is that the Donne poem rests heavily on the rhetoric in the poem's argument, whereas Hecht's works off the visual imagery. I want to expand on this aspect of Hecht's work in later chapters.

Jonathan Post argues that Donne supplied the young poet "with a way of thinking in poetry, that is, a way of structuring thought rather than a list of Donnean topics" (Post "Donne" 283-94). Post describes this thinking as a "propositional structure". I would describe it as a fulcrum upon which the thinking in the poetry balances, as I want to incorporate the engagement with the reader that these arguments assume. In Hecht's poem, the moment of ecstasy is realised in a precise observation that picks out the concrete symbolism in the Bellini, merging it with an abstract significance. In *Holy Sonnet VI*, the moment of death, the

separation of body and soul, is worked through a combination of concrete and insubstantial images.

What began, in *A Summoning of Stones*, with Hecht's studied considerations of the moment of death providing profound clarity in "At The Frick", continues in a richer way through many of his later lyrical poems: discussed later in this thesis. The synthesis between Santayana's poetic theory on beauty in language, its sensuousness, and engagement with what is essentially the qualities found in Donne, Herbert and Marvell remained, though harnessed to a broad human canvas and expressed, at times, in a more relaxed style.

In 2003, shortly before his death, Hecht wrote: "It is a matter of some curiosity to me, how far I have come...since my beginnings as an earnest 'Childe' of the New Critics, especially as one who affirmed their notion of a poem as *autotelic*" (Hecht *Melodies* 6). Certainly the New Critical approach to reading revealed different aspects of his work, but he had gone further and deliberately incorporated all manner of intertextual references. Hecht asked readers to engage actively with material beyond the text, and he used epigraphs at the beginning of poems with the explicit hope that readers might read the poem in a particular way (Hecht *Vespers* 9; *Transparent* 29; *Flight* 34; *Darkness* 63). There was no longer a requirement for emotion and intellect to be balanced through a strict adherence to the New Critical style of writing. Hecht became more catholic in his consideration of what makes poetry work. As early as 1988 in a lengthy interview with McClatchy he says:

There are two famous schools of thought about this, one represented by Yeats, who said something like, A poem comes right with a click, like a box snapping closed; and the other by Paul Valéry, who declared that poems are never finished, only abandoned. I have nothing novel or useful to add to the controversy. To the degree that a poem strives for formal harmonies—by which I mean not only meter and rhyme, but the careful and deliberate resolution of all its parts, themes, metaphoric structures—the poet is in a position to gauge, to a certain degree, the extent of his success, at least in regard to his self-assigned task of braiding his loose ends into a coherent pattern. And he is able to guess how much tinkering still needs to be done. In verse of a looser kind a keener instinct is needed, and this is what so vividly

distinguishes a truly remarkable poet like William Carlos Williams from his disciples. As for the book, for better or worse, I incline often to think of it as composed musically. That is to say, I like to demonstrate variety when possible by juxtaposition of items of different form, length, technique, and so forth. My general feeling, however, is that poets, with a few exceptions, sweat blood over these matters and they are noticed neither by reviewers nor by readers, and all the painful calibrations and measurements are for nothing. Sometimes, of course, a prolific poet, like Yeats or Frost or Stevens, will produce a book that has a beautiful and self-evident consistency, coming as it does out of a major preoccupation with a theme, or even with a form, like dramatic monologues. The nearest I have come to such achievement has been in the writing of some poems that I consider "long".

(McClatchy "Hecht" 184-85)

There is much to unpack in this quotation, particularly in reference to dramatic monologues, his critical writing on poetry and the question of a poet's deliberation in the positioning of poems within any given collection. But importantly, there is no indication of strict adherence to New Critical tenets here or indeed a formal approach to poetry. Hecht praises William Carlos Williams for having a "keener instinct" and writing verse of a "looser kind".

With this comment in mind, I now turn to Hecht's views on what makes poetry work, outlined in his Mellon Lectures series and in the interview above. No poet writes in isolation, as they begin by following those poets they admire and incorporating their work into their own poetic identity and voice. Similarly, no poet is immune from the critical debates that inform how poetry is received, analysed and read. This is particularly so for Hecht, as he was both poet and teacher, writing a number of books critically analysing the works of others and on poetry in general. Therefore, it is important to understand the changing theoretical terrain in which he worked and taught; the wider critical debates in literature that intersect with his work. A careful reconsideration of Hecht's critical position on formal poetry reveals a more complex relationship than might be assumed. For example, intertextual references within, and contiguous to, Hecht's poetry are a source of illumination, adding complexity to any reading of them.

Most of Hecht's contributions to literary criticism were made after 1989. There is a sense that as he produced fewer collections, he took up writing about poetry in general. Jonathan

Post says: “The understory of these years, however, is the paucity of poems”, which, he claims, was the result of the distress Hecht experienced “over the sharp criticism Joseph Brodsky levelled against *See Naples and Die*” (Hecht *Letters* 205).

Certainly, Hecht defends formal poetry because it was, he felt, under question, and it was a style that suited him best. To say, though, that he condemned other forms of writing poetry is wrong. There are a number of related questions that need to be addressed. What did Hecht mean by formal poetry? What did he think it took to write poetry that works and did he change his mind over time on these matters?

Changes in his critical thinking are gradual. His writing style is erudite and modest, rarely strident or indeed definitive, though there are some notable exceptions. For example, in distinguishing between Wimsatt and Barthes, he writes that “it is a giant step, a seven league stride, from Wimsatt to Barthes and others of the current French School of Decomposition so favoured these days in certain circles” (Hecht *Obbligati* 23). In many of the essays, central points are made through reference to other writers’ comments. This “double glazing” or glossolaliatic approach reinforces Hecht’s position as part of a long tradition, giving it a cloak of authority. This tentativeness, I think, stems not from any lack of confidence on his part, but from a conservative approach to writing poetry.

When Hecht writes about poetry, he speaks, for the most part, on a particular set of issues. This is due to his initial “brief”: a preoccupation with a defence of formal poetry as a legitimate style and how it is realised in the work of others. This preoccupation reflects elements of his own poetry, particularly earlier on, and begins a critical journey where a metaphysical style and what he ends up describing as formal poetry are not the same. As Peter Steele wrote in his review of Hecht’s *On the Laws of the Poetic Art*, “when poets write at large about their art they are likely to be writing autographically” (Steele “Leaning” 40). I accept this to be the case where Hecht is concerned. Hecht’s journey away from the New Criticism in writing poetry is discernible and will be outlined in the poems considered in Chapters Four and Five. Similarly, his critical essays and books on poetry display a loosening of the ties to that movement.

I have already outlined his early critical writing on poetry, where he defends the New Criticism. Adherence to formality as a “gold standard” for the writing of poetry, outlined in his first journal article of 1965, fades but an embracing of a metaphysical style remains constant throughout his work. Slow change, over some years, can go unnoticed, particularly when positions are restated to accommodate expanding concepts in the light of what is occurring externally. Nor does it help if one is publicly identified, as Hecht was, with a particular type of poetry.

Hecht works on two fronts. He deplores what he describes as critics who “habitually treat words like billiard balls and so are convinced of their transmutability into a realm that is immune and indifferent to the literal” (Hecht *Obbligati* 272). Yet he also knows that what is being written needs to be fresh and substantive. There is no formal break or confessional recanting, but change by accretion can be identified.

With the publication of his first book of literary criticism, *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism* (1986), a case is mounted for “formal poetry”. Criticism is seen as very much the handmaiden of poetry, and in the book’s preface, he states: “I also mean to affirm what I conceive to be the proper role of criticism as a musical obbligato: that is, a counterpoint to its subject, and remains always subordinate to the text upon which it presumes to comment” (Hecht *Obbligati* vii). A New Critical approach is clear when he writes that the critic cannot limit the meaning of any text either to what the author thought it meant or to what the critic may posit as the author’s intention. The text’s the thing. What Hecht deplores is the tendency of critics to be lost “in their own subjective mists, their solipsisms, their blind self-absorption” (Hecht *Obbligati* 23). Nor is he a fan of the school of criticism that produces an analysis of a poets’ work “which diligently discovers parental inadequacy, repressed homosexuality and frustrated love” (Hecht *Obbligati* 85). This remark needs to be qualified, however, for Hecht is quite willing to draw on his own experience of mental depression. Hecht made this point to Philip Hoy in reference to the poem “Green: An Epistle” (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 68).

This disdain for the extra-mural aspect of a poet’s life also surfaces in an essay on Robert Lowell in the same collection (Hecht *Obbligati* 266). He recounts a discussion between the editor of a “popular magazine” and a distinguished “critic-author-editor” about commissioning an article on Lowell where the poetry was not the subject at all, rather it was

to be a recounting of his “girlfriends and extra marital affairs” and his “episodes of violence and incarceration in mental hospitals” (Hecht *Obbligati* 266).

The essay on Richard Wilbur makes Hecht’s position clear:

...there may be those, (Sir Herbert Read, T E Hulme et. al.) viewing the whole enterprise of formal poetry with suspicion or derision, who will suppose that this richness of inflections, this abundance of verbs, has been forced upon the poet by the ruthless exigencies of stanzaic form...For those to whom formal poetry is itself unnatural, or archaic, an embarrassed or twisted parlance of one who is self-consciously ill-at-ease holding the floor, any unusual feature of poetry, even its most towering graces, can be thought of as no more than the by-products, the industrial waste, entailed by meter and rhyme:... (Hecht *Obbligati* 132)

For the usually circumspect Hecht, this is anger and has the same luminous rage as his poem “Lapidary Inscription with Explanatory Note” (2004), which was directed at the growing free verse trend in American poetry (Hecht *Darkness* 54).

But even at this point, reading poetry includes a consciously intertextual approach. This is made evident in his 1983 essay on Lowell, in which he discusses Ian Hamilton’s reading of Lowell’s “Home after Three Months Away” (1959) (Hecht *Obbligati* 267). Hecht praises this reading because it points out with “great care the stratified, geographical layers of reference that work through the poet’s entire biography” (Hecht *Obbligati* 267). He also praises Lowell’s “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (1946) because it holds within it “prose passages from Thoreau...conspicuous references from Melville that are woven carefully into the fabric of the poem” (Hecht *Obbligati* 273). In the same collection, Hecht shows himself to be a fine intertextual interpreter of Auden’s work. I refer particularly to his reading of “In Praise of Limestone” (1948) and “The Shield of Achilles” (1952). He says about the former: “In this poem, the three invitations to the saint-to-be, the intendant Caesars, and the really reckless, correspond rather clearly to the three temptations of Christ in Saint Luke” (Hecht *Obbligati* 37).

Hecht wrote about this poem again in *The Hidden Law*, where he takes up his earlier intertextual reading of this section:

Whatever else they may be, the best and the worst of us are the exception to the normal human rule, and are precisely for that reason attracted by the lure of other symbolic landscapes rather than this so distinctly humanised one. The best and worst now hear as audible voices the Siren songs of enchantment, speaking to some profound need of their natures. The austerity of “granite wastes,” with its reminders of the marmoreal inevitability of death, its *memento mori* bleakness, calls out to the “saints to be” and seduces them with its cold appeal. The malleability of the “clays and gravels” makes its appeal not merely to the tyrannical and dictatorial Caesars who rejoice in worldly power, but even to those secular reformers who wish to believe that all mankind’s ills can be cured by legislative program and social engineering. The third siren voice of temptation declares that the only gratuitous act, which is truly free, is suicide, a demonstration that one is emancipated from all the bonds, demands and needs of the world. Fittingly the voice that whispers this invitation, “an older colder voice” is “the oceanic whisper,” the voice of unbridled chaos: “And the earth was without form, and void: and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

These three Siren songs are temptations to spiritual sins, luring Odysseus, the wanderer, the “inconstant one,” to various delusions of *soidisant* constancy; but they also correspond to the three temptations of Christ in the fourth chapter of Luke. They also correspond as well to the temptations paraded before Tom Rakewell by Nick Shadow, Auden’s Mephistopheles, in *The Rake’s Progress*. (Hecht *Hidden Law* 308)

The Hidden Law was published in 1993. The text shows that Hecht’s critical vocabulary had altered since 1986, as he goes outside the text to explicate its possible readings.

In his final book, *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry*, this movement away from New Criticism is explicit. While he reiterates the claim that poetry is an exercise through the “indispensable instrumentality of intellect” and continues to use the metaphor of the weaving or cobbling together of words in relation to poetry, what is different is his acceptance, not only of an “oscillation” between material within and outside the poem, but of the fact that history and social context matter (Hecht *Melodies* 5). This extends to literary criticism. He quotes Eliot’s statement that “No exponent of criticism...has ...ever made the

preposterous assumption that it is an autotelic activity" (Hecht *Melodies* 7). This is something that Hecht might not have done in 1965.

While criticism remains, for Hecht, centred on the literary work, he now takes a more catholic approach to his readings: "I have appropriated whatever tools, methodologies, and critical strategies that came to hand when engaging in composing these essays" (Hecht *Melodies* 10). He also notes that he "changed his mind about certain texts over time and that setting things down in print smacked dangerously of asserting some rash finality of judgment which I knew perfectly well was not likely to last long" (Hecht *Melodies* 13). He praises critics for their capacity, not only to expand his understanding of particular poems, but to do the same for whole "genres and types of writing, entire regions of thinking, sources of feeling, and especially social or historical conventions and rituals that often lie immersed and unnoticed at the bottom of some work of literature" (Hecht *Melodies* 13-14). One could be uncharitable and say this is a case of "wanting to have one's cake and eat it", but I believe that this passage shows Hecht changing his mind.

By the time of his final collection of critical essays, Hecht had embraced the importance of intertextuality completely. He revisits his book on Auden's poetry and refers not only to "In Praise of Limestone's" reference to Luke's Gospel, but makes connections between the poem's antimythological myth and Wallace Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" as well as Seamus Heaney's prose. He still speaks of poetry as the distillation of the "powerful, rich and complex emotion of a very dramatic kind" that elicits "passion and intelligence" (Hecht *Melodies* 50). He maintains a belief that poetry is an intellectual and deliberative exercise and adds that "the poet can also achieve powerful effects by implication, by innuendo, by pointed and dramatic omission of something we have a right to expect" (Hecht *Melodies* 13). But he also acknowledges elsewhere that "the frame" of a painting is crucial saying, it "may constitute one of the most challenging parts of the painter's (poet's) achievement" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 15-16). Where does a painting or poem end? There is no definite answer because words and text also have an "unfathomable enigmatic charm...puzzles that will never be wholly answered" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 50). These comments are not New Criticism and the word "implication" accepts that matters outside the text are of importance; "innuendo" may refer to material beyond the frame of the poem.

Hecht's interviews exhibit a similar accretive shift and oscillation. Some years after the publication of *Obbligati*, when interviewed by his fellow-poet and friend J.D. McClatchy, he talks of formality, but its definition has been extended. Formality is more than metre, rhyme, stanzas or dramatic narrative; it also refers to the "careful and deliberate resolutions of all its [the poem's] parts, themes, metaphoric structures whereby the poet is in a position to gauge to a certain degree the extent of his success, at least in regard to his self-assigned task of braiding his loose ends into a coherent pattern" (McClatchy "Hecht" 184). Hecht says that this occurs not only about a particular poem but within a collection of poems. Formality is "a momentary stay against confusion" (McClatchy "Hecht" 193).

Thus, formality is now a tactic that works for Hecht as a means to encounter and deal with the patently unjustifiable and, in much of his work, apparently unspeakable violence that humans inflict on one another. Moreover, it is now a mode of writing that is more than a prosodic framework. To illustrate the point he comments that blank verse is "the kind of metrical frame that allows the greatest latitude to a poet in trying to move between an ordinary speaking voice and a voice of heightened poetic response to a moment", and so provides a dramatic juxtaposition of metaphors (Hammer 94). He adds: "I share with John Hollander and a great number of others, the delight in formality. It has its musical component, a metrical and rhythmical component; *but it is also a valuable form of artistic discourse*" (Hammer 99). Formality is being reworked as a concept..

Between 1990 and 2004, Hecht was on the advisory board of a poetry magazine, *The Formalist*, which was specifically dedicated to the promotion of traditional verse forms within American literature.⁵⁰ He also despaired in a 1999 interview, titled "The Situation of American Writing", that "meterless poetry had won the field" (Hutner and Hecht 278). He is puzzled that its proponents of this "meterless poetry" tried to trace their lineage to Pound, whom he claims as being more formal in approach because he spoke of the "sculpture of rhyme" (Hutner and Hecht 278).

⁵⁰ *The Formalist* was edited by William Baer, and was published biannually from 1990 until the final issue in 2004.

For Hecht, verse units remained characters in a poem's drama. "One of the pleasures of reading formal poetry surely consists in seeing how well the poet is able to work within his limitations of meter and rhyme", he says (McClatchy "Hecht" 194). He extends this concept by referring to the power of poetry to take our attention away from ourselves in an effort of "concentrated attention", and says that:

One of the pleasures that one enjoys in certain poems is the feeling that the artist has gone about his work with such care and responsibility that everything has its right place and the whole thing hangs together, or all the parts support one another in such a way that it is not going to end up with the whole thing collapsing. (Hammer 103)

Such a position, though, should not be confused with blind adherence. In *The Formalist* interview he insists that formality has to be "vital", that of itself it will not guarantee that a poem "will work" (Baer 67). In his conversation with Philip Hoy he maintains that innovation of form is important, (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 82). He also praises William Carlos Williams, a proponent of free verse, as an outstanding poet. When speaking to McClatchy he repeats that form is not just metre and rhyme, but something else (McClatchy "Hecht" 193-94). Collections are seen as a whole, and the position of poems and their framing are important, albeit often not recognised. But he would also be the first to disown formality if it were to be used as a straightjacket.

Moreover, he says that "any good poet...formalist or free verser, creates his own music, which in due course we come to identify with his style. If he is a formalist his musical capabilities can be enriched and complicated by the rhythms of his individual speech, his diction and his patterns of thought which are uniquely his own but which he has superimposed upon a formal pattern that is part of our literary inheritance" (McClatchy "Hecht" 198). The music he talks about is not necessarily wedded to formality or a metaphysical approach. For him, though, I suspect that free verse is much harder to pull off. He needs the dialogue between structure and metaphor to establish a dramatic tension for his imagined places and characters. Nevertheless, he accepts that poetry will work without being either metaphysical in style or formal in structure; and that these attributes are no longer two sides of the same coin, but a much looser coupling.

The Mellon lecture series also marks a deliberate step in Hecht's move away from New Criticism. He argues:

Art is certainly capable of retrospection, or evoking and appealing to memory. Like both poetry and music, it employs what we call quotation. A painting may recall the work of an earlier artist, either deliberately or unconsciously, and it may require the viewer to remember earlier contexts, to see them strangely, significantly, or shockingly revived in new ones. (Hecht *Poetic Art* 26)

Poets such as Donne were noted for the dissonance of their metaphors, particularly from other disciplines ("stiff twin compasses"). But the quotation above is different. Hecht has moved on to owning a whole cultural array of past traditions, even those that are drawn on unconsciously. This is a considerable change from the philosophical framework articulated by Grierson about metaphysical poetry. The change is in keeping with Eliot's sense of the allusiveness required in modern poetry, and Hecht acknowledges the importance of intertextual readings.

In another of these lectures, he writes:

There is no satisfactory way by which I can well illustrate all the manifold uses and devices of poetic music – the interweaving of assonance and dissonance, the complication of meter and stanzaic form, the echoic effects of repetitions as well as allusions to musical effects both within the context of the poem and to earlier works. (Hecht *Poetic Art* 60)

A footnote refers to his fellow poet John Frederick Nims' similar attitude to formality: "how right Baudelaire was in saying 'prosodies' are not arbitrarily invented tyrannies, but a collection of rules demanded by the very organisation of the spiritual being" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 180). The emphasis on "prosodies" is still there but Hecht stretches it by using the metaphor of music. He acknowledges that there is a dialectical relationship between speech and formal poetry, and an inherent anarchistic quality in a text.

Paradoxically, then, for Hecht, there is no orthodoxy, as poetry that works rebels against it. This unorthodoxy is referred to in the Mellon Lecture entitled "The Contrariety of Impulses": "I have attempted to make the claim that...poetry in particular, is always multivalenced, and

implicitly when not explicitly dialectical" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 130). And again from earlier on: "Like all the other arts [poetry] has no orthodoxy; indeed, as soon as anything even approaches the region of the conventional and firmly fixed, it invites rebellion and counter movement. Poetry as an art seems regularly to oscillate between song and speech" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 56). The problem presented by these alternatives ought to be evident: "song and the artifices of formality lead in the direction of the artificial, the insincere, the passionless and the servile mimicry of established formulas. But speech, as a goal, leads to formless rant and ungovernable prolixity" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 56). He seeks to get the balance right, and not advocate a cause. Hecht's declaration that there is no orthodoxy would imply that writing poetry with a conscious observance of rhyme, metre and stanzaic construction is not *de rigueur*. He is now prepared to accept that formulas can lead to sterility.

What Hecht praises in others he also claims as his own. He is a bowerbird collecting the thoughts of others to support his own comments. He declares that the

arts almost invariably express or embody conflicting impulses, not simply in their meanings but in their very natures. They are engaged in the business of going beyond the limits of their means. In doing so, they infrequently resort to poaching on to one another's territories and appropriating techniques and devices that it might be said were not native to them. (Hecht *Poetic Art* 6)

A poet may have in mind not a single work of art but "let us say an artist's manner, a style of seeing the world that we can identify either with a particular artist or with a period in the history of art" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 28).

Put simply, as a critic and academic, Hecht now concedes that free verse can sing, that historical and social context matter to a poem, and that an intertextual reading of poetry provides valuable insight. Hecht's own poetry included references to other texts and materials from very early on. He defends formal poetry as a valid type of writing amongst others, not as an exclusivist declaration that only poetry written in that style is to be valued. He did this because he felt that formal poetry was being overwhelmed by other ways of writing poetry.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Robert Lowell, Hecht's contemporary, also began writing poetry in the New Critical style. When interviewed by Frederick Seidel in 1961, Lowell had become deeply disenchanted with its tenets:

Any number of people are guilty of writing a complicated poem that has a certain amount of symbolism in it and really difficult meaning, a wonderful poem to teach. Then you unwind it and you feel that the intelligence, the experience, whatever goes into it, is skin-deep. (Seidel 69)

He struck out dramatically, fashioning a type of poetry commonly called "confessional" (Perkins 14). Hecht, in a much quieter way, also expressed similar doubts about the straight jacket approach to poetry propounded by Ransom.

What did others make of Hecht's own concern that he possessed a "Too easy eloquence of speech" (Hecht *Summoning* 50)? Unlike Lowell, Hecht's New Critical polish, if not its autotelic qualities, was regarded as a constant hallmark of his writing and, for some critics, denoted sterility and lack of development. The surface brilliance blinded some to his poetry's serious concerns and consideration of our human condition: it was considered his Achilles heel.

In his lengthy interview with Hoy, he denies remembering Auden complaining about an excess of detail but, in the recently published selection of Hecht's letters, it is clear that it was probably the case (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 39). In a letter to his parents in 1951 after visiting Auden at Ischia, he writes:

He [Auden] feels that details are an ornamental embellishment to verse and should never be allowed to distract the reader's attention from the main line of discourse, whereas I believe that the details should be made to subsume, to contain, to embody, to incarnate the point and meaning of the poem. (Hecht *Letters* 94)

As recently as 2013, Edward Mendelson complained of Hecht's tendency to "stuff his lines with adjectival filler" (referring to "After the Rain" in *Millions of Strange Shadows*), and that some of his longer narrative poems "lapsed into overripe syntax" (namely, "The Venetian Vespers" in *The Venetian Vespers*) (Mendelson 62). His often-strict adherence to formal structures was considered a double-edged sword. Mendelson is not the only commentator to have these sorts of reservations. Benjamin Markovits, reviewing Christopher Ricks's

recent book on Hecht's poetry, refers to Hecht's poetry as "addicted to its own surfaces" (Markovits 8). Joseph Bennett said of Hecht's first collection that there was a tendency to give way to "language purely for itself" (Bennett 307). On the publication of the poet's third collection, *Millions of Strange Shadows*, Steven Madoff, while saying that some individual poems achieve "poetic perfection", complains: "I do not find his results satisfying" because the words' music is being produced by "a tenuous mellifluousness that often seems to fail" (Madoff 188-90). I address similar concerns in Chapter Five, when discussing the poems which explore the creation of dramatic characters.

For some, the enjoyment of his poetry seems to have a caveat attached, centring on a perceived superficiality which springs, partly, from the perfection of his words. I will focus here on the criticisms made by Donald Davie as they capture what seems to be the general concern referred to above. Many of his poems, Davie opines, are drenched with "erudite and cosmopolitan references" (Davie "Review" 43). Davie is critical of this tendency, describing the poems as being

full of ...epigraphs from Molière and so on; the diction is recherché, opulent and laced with the sort of wit that costs nothing. Here and there too, the poet knowingly invites what some reviewers have duly responded with, the modish epithet 'Baroque'. But...the right word...is the much less fashionable 'Victorian'. (Davie "Review" 43-44)

Davie further commented that often

there is no pretence that the ostensible subject exists for the poet except as a peg on which to hang the embroidered robe of style; and style, thus cut loose of any responsibilities towards what it offers to express degenerates at once into virtuosity, frigid accomplishment. (Davie "Review" 44)

In his most extensive interview with Philip Hoy, in *Between the Lines*, Hecht describes Davie's later review of *Venetian Vespers* as "particularly wounding" and "uncomplicatedly vicious". He thought he had become the reviewer's "whipping boy" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 29-30).

In the latter review, comparing Hecht's work with that of Josephine Miles, Davie dismisses what he sees as the "formal excessiveness" championed by Hecht and his ilk, declaring that they confused form with the "framework" of a poem (Davie "The Twain" 86). According to Davie, true form "comes from within a text" (Davie "The Twain" 86).

Madoff also was troubled by the "melodic intricacy of expression, and the expansive discourse that is propelled through its argument as much by the perfection of the words' sound as by the thesis that they construct...the complexity of this marriage marks for a certain inscrutability" (Madoff 189). For Madoff, this "melodic intricacy of expression" was evident at the beginning of "A Birthday Poem" (Madoff 189).

Comments such as those made by Madoff are in the minority. These comments have, however, had an effect in how some approach Hecht's poetry. B. H. Fairchild reflects this perception in 2007, noting that the word "elegant" is applied to Hecht's work as a "code word for over refinement, ornamentation, or some unnatural, inauthentic distortion of subject matter in the service of artifice" (Fairchild 57).

To be fair, Hecht also uses the American vernacular as a counterpoint to this "elegant" language, although he is not apologetic about using obscure words if they fit his purpose (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 80-81). Excellent examples of this are to be found in "The Short End" or "The Ghost in the Martini", both of which will be discussed in Chapter Five. For him, language enhanced the dramatic quality of the poem, not just in relation to the poem's subject, but in contrasting language idioms (for example, the switching from the American vernacular of "so whyantcha fix yerself a drink?" to the ornate "surfeit of colors") in "The Short End" (Hecht *Transparent* 10-11)). This verbal contrast enhances a contrapuntal movement in the poems themselves. As he told Hoy, "my instinct for contrast and dialectic is almost always at work, as a dramatic element of the poem, so that any flamboyance is likely to be confronted or opposed by counter-force, directness and elemental grit" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 81). In His Mellon Lectures, he takes this concept of variation further, speaking about a poem requiring variation in structure in much the same way as breathing. He writes that the "artifices of formality lead in the direction of the artificial, the insincere, the passionless and servile mimicry of established formulas", and alternatively that "speech leads to chat, formless rant and ungovernable prolixity" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 57). Hecht also writes:

It may be claimed that in a poem of any length, such variety of compression and expansion, such oscillation between the relaxation of spoken discourse and the compactness and Delphic intricacy of the complex lyric is virtually essential. Moreover, complexity can parade itself under the wonderful guise of simplicity, and there have been many readers who rejoiced in the delusion that the poems of Blake, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost were sweet and simple expressions of moral uplift or benign views of life and nature, when in fact such poems were darkly complex, ambiguous, and frankly alarming. (Hecht *Poetic Art* 57)

Thus, complexity of thought and emotion is what matters to Hecht.

Nevertheless, the frame through which his poetry was considered was, for some, hard to reset. His reputation appeared to be inextricably tied to the theoretical limitations of the New Criticism itself. I return to Davie's argument that Hecht confuses form with framework. This cuts deeply because he does not say that Hecht's poetry is bad, but that it just does not measure up to the first rank— the poetic art has passed him by. Davie asks a central question though:

Against the Johnsonian virtue of succinctness, we are offered [In Hecht's poetry] the no less venerable principle of invention, and the joy of it – Invention...finding tropes and figures through which writing may sustain and extend itself. Fertility, expressing itself in copiousness – who can deny that that is very near the nerve of what we celebrate, in any language, at any time, as poetry? And yet how do we reconcile that Spenserian principle with the Johnsonian demand for conciseness, for “never a word too much”? (Davie "The Twain" 87)

Davie claims that Josephine Miles, the poet he compares to Hecht, gets the balance right (Davie "The Twain" 85). He also concludes that he prefers the Johnsonian approach:

“Whatever good reasons there were in Edmund Spenser's time for his copiousness, I cannot think they hold good for 1980, seventy years after the imagist movement, whereas the opposite value of conciseness was surely what that movement was all about” (Davie "The Twain" 91). Davie's love of plain speaking shows that he shares Johnson's view of what T. S. Eliot called metaphysical poetry:

Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased". (Johnson 24)

His comments imply that to rely on elegance is passé and the cleverness associated with metaphysical poets has become dated. Eliot's 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets" would argue for a contrary position to Davie, and that is a position that Hecht would endorse (Eliot "Metaphysical" 281).

Davie's summoning of the Spenserian and Johnsonian spirits raises a further point: the value of drama produced through prolixity. Davie makes clear his unease with poetry drenched in detail. He likes his poetic drama to be to the point and unadorned. The matter is not as simple for Hecht. He aligns himself with those of the modernist poetry school in regard to their avoidance of abstraction: "I have no doubt that this point of view would quite correctly have been found in my poems, both at that time and since, that is, a marked avoidance of abstractions, which Pound warned poets to go in fear of" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 40). His tendency to pile on detail and to use interesting and rare words has been noted and is defended as being the job of a poet (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* xi). His readers, he insists, should work to enjoy his poetry, and he paraphrases Joyce's taunt about the prolixity of *Finnegan's Wake* with approval: "Doubtless there is a little defiance in it; a tiny flavour of Joyce's taunt that it took him twenty years to write *Finnegan's Wake*, and he expected readers to take just as long to read it" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 73).

Hecht's poetry, though, is far more than an argument on the efficaciousness, or otherwise, of a formal style. Surfaces can be deceptive. Certainly Hecht, because of his continued support of metre and rhyme as legitimate modes of poetic expression, has occasionally been unfairly dismissed by critics. I disagree with this dismissal; for, while maintaining a deep connection with formally structured poetry, Hecht refashioned it into a dynamic sounding board, producing poetry of emotional and intellectual balance, substance and style.

Labels can be misleading and in Hecht's case particularly so, as he certainly did not subscribe to the notion that formal poetry was the only style that worked. His poetry continued to display a brilliant command of sonnets,⁵¹ sestinas,⁵² villanelles,⁵³ rhyme and metre as that was the kind of versatility with which he was most comfortable. Over time, though, he also incorporated wider ranges of expression. A more nuanced assessment of his work is required. It is with these comments in mind that I will now try to demonstrate that Hecht's polish was balanced with considerable depth that should not be ignored.

⁵¹ For example, "Spring Break" published in *The New Yorker* September 13th 2004 (61).

⁵² For example, "The Book of Yolek" in *The Transparent Man* (73).

⁵³ For example, the poem "Prospects" in *Flight Among the Tombs* (55).

Chapter Three

Hecht the Theologian

How did Hecht apply his emerging poetic style? He turned towards the writing of poetry as a confrontation, theologically framed, with the question of evil. This chapter looks at poems that engage with the issue of theodicy across his work. I will argue that the engagement undertaken is sustained, substantial and deeply wedded to some of the key theological discussions about our human purpose in the post-Holocaust era. His poems enact this substantial theological investigation in a dramatic and imaginative way that in turn reflects those conversations.

Below is one of the poems, published in *The Hard Hours*, which gives us an indication of this direction and the theological implications of Hecht's work. The poem is titled "'More Light!, More Light!'", and is dedicated to Heinrich Blücher and Hanna Arendt, German- Jewish émigrés. The poem is, prima facie, very similar to "Samuel Sewell". We see the same concise quatrains. The poem's title repeats the supposed last words of Goethe as he pleaded for increased enlightenment at the point of death (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 54). Post notes the similarities between this poem and Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1940) with its distant, detached depiction of suffering (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 55). The first three stanzas recall the martyrdom of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, the latter suffering from a botched igniting of the pyre (Rothman).⁵⁴ The last line of the first stanza is in quotation marks but cannot be sourced precisely (Rothman):⁵⁵

⁵⁴ David Rothman's article "A Formal Feeling Comes: Anthony Hecht's Elegiac Forms" is an online article and for this reason, no page numbers are given in thesis. Please see the bibliography.

⁵⁵ To be specific, Rothman says that there is little doubt this line "has a concrete literary source, but if one of the victims named above did write it, it is well-buried and Hecht has not been helpful or obvious in leaving us clues".

Composed in the Tower before his execution
 These moving verses, and being brought at that time
 Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:
 "I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime."

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
 The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.
 His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap
 Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
 Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
 And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
 That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquillity.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 64)

Some lines are tight pentameters, but most have five beats with looser syllable counts, varying the strict accentual-syllabic pattern. Some are enjambed but the stanzas are not, and each stanza is a complete sentence. Hecht's poem melds the rhyme scheme of a ballad or hymnal quatrains with the pentameters (albeit often loosened) of the heroic or elegiac stanza, as seen in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard". Again, this is all very much in line with the dictates of New Criticism as outlined in a previous chapter, where form and meaning cannot be separated. The sense of some hope is delivered by the reference to Cardinal Newman's hymn ("Kindly Light") and martyrdom, no matter how agonising, anticipates salvation through Christ as a *sine qua non* of his existence.

Hecht then employs a cinematic "jump cut" to bring the poem into the present: a "German" wood located close to Goethe's place of death:

We move now to outside a German wood.
 Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
 In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
 And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
 Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
 A Luger settled back deeply in its glove.
 He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.
 The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
 When only the head was exposed the order came
 To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
 When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
 The Luger hovered lightly in its glove.
 He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
 Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
 Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
 And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 64-65)

The “German” in the opening line is important given the poem’s dedication to German-Jewish refugees and the significance of Goethe, Germany’s greatest poet. It fuses the horror of what is about to unfold: the nation and its cultural heritage are on trial. Post describes the structure of the poem as a diptych and claims that it is “the first instance of a technique Hecht will return to frequently in his later poetry as a means of setting up often surprising and sometimes shocking contrasts” (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 56). I want to be alert as well to the poem’s rhyming pattern in the second and fourth lines, which knits the whole together. Hence, my preference for the “jump cut” analogy with its focus on shifts in time while sustaining the same central concern.

Hecht’s poetry here has an immediate and steely dramatic quality. In the present tense, each line is a complete sentence which, while maintaining distanced observation, heightens the urgency of an eyewitness account. The second section retells an episode from Kogan’s *The Theory and Practice of Hell* (1952) where in Buchenwald, a Pole named Strazka, was asked to be part of the same events (Rothman). The poem now recounts the gratuitous humiliation and torture of helpless prisoners for the satisfaction of their sadistic captors,

signalling the moral and theological dimensions of the confrontation being explored by Hecht.

In this poem, the safety net of a Judeo-Christian God that supported the Protestant martyrs is gone. Both the Pole and the Jews are alone in facing their fates. The remains of incinerated humanity are as “black soot” which, long after this tragedy, settles on lifeless eyes. Goethe’s plea for “more light” is emphatically denied. Goethe’s “light” is unseen and silent before an incomprehensible evil, which, unlike the poem’s theologically resolved first section, has no spiritual answer or enlightenment.

Rothman’s careful analysis of this poem describes this section thus:

The first [stanza] is the axis of the poem, the line which connects the two stories. Making it tight focuses the dramatic movement from one story to another. The second is the horrible axis within the second story, when the Pole’s spirit is utterly broken and his humiliation is complete. The third is the quickly following turning point where that humiliation is revealed for what it is: pointless, unable even to save the one who was humiliated from a less painful or protracted death. And the fourth, with its heartbreaking enjambment—“...and every day came mute / Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,” drives home the horrible silence of God and of man in light of what has happened.

Rothman places great emphasis on the structure of the poem, declaring “that it could articulate even the most difficult challenge of life itself, which is our own capacity for evil and yet even so to provide pleasure for the living, which is what all poems must do if they are to survive”. He is correct to point out that hidden in the poem is an elegiac foundation, but he stops at this point. Perhaps Hecht suffers at the hands of those who wish his formal structures to be the central element that makes his poetry matter, as much as from those who criticise him for being too baroque and insubstantial. In both readings the subject matter, which is so starkly revealed, is secondary.

Yet the extremity of the subject itself is very much a source of the text. Moral evil, of such dimension, demands our attention separately from the reflexive framework of New Criticism. Hecht’s emotional engagement in the penultimate stanza’s double execution is patent. “No light, no light” is a heartfelt cry. The sinister Luger’s threat is visceral. That evil’s

symbol is an inanimate life-ending object makes it more so. This is not the same as Lowell's deeply personal exposure, but just as emotionally compelling. The ghosts of the last stanza are "mute" and, without a God to whom to pray ("No prayers or incense rose up"), moral evil is faced alone. The poem asks us to address the unthinkable question: if there is nothing, no resolution, spiritual or otherwise, does evil triumph? Hecht's poem takes Kogan's historical record and describes dramatically the impossible choices being asked of the Pole.

Kierkegaard captures these impossible choices in the concluding letter of his pseudonym, Constantine Constantinus, where he contemplates the dialectic between the exception and the universal, saying "it is just as difficult to kill a man as to let him live" (Kierkegaard *Fear* 226). This phrase encapsulates the paradox and horror of evil in the poem that we have to confront and the inscrutability, or lack of an answer provided by the poem: "No prayers or incense rose up in those hours".

Such visceral turbulence is very different from the disinterested critical intelligence of "Samuel Sewell". The story of the Oxford Martyrs and Kogan's record of Straska's Buchenwald ordeal add historical context and are essential to the poem's emotional weight. For one there is "Kindly Light"; for the others, nothing. Again, such intertextual incorporation of historical material is a departure from the tenets of Ransom.

Impossible choices are faced, not as an academic exercise, but through impassioned questioning. Both intellect and emotions are fully engaged. Is there enlightenment, as prayed for in the poem's title? Possibly not. Certainly, the structural formality of the stanzas acts as an ironic counterpoint to this despair. But the dramatic, deliberate sequencing of recorded events, across time, is a rubric within which Hecht asks the reader to grasp our inability to know the nature of our existence: we may have to accept that there is no answer. This poem ends in the despair of "black soot". Where does that leave us? Hecht is taking his poetic concerns into a dialogue on the nature of theodicy and evil, which is both deeply personal and fraught but also asks questions for us all. In an immediate way, he addresses evil in a poem that throws up questions going to the probity of malevolent existence. Hecht faces the possibility enunciated in Job 26:7: "He stretches out the north over the empty place, and hangs the earth upon nothing."

Similarly, the philosopher John Caputo's obituary on the death of Jacques Derrida spoke about uncertainty and the possibility that there was no "Great Secret". Caputo summons Kierkegaard's "Johannes Climacus" who demurred saying he "is" not a Christian but was doing the best he can do to "become" one (Caputo "Derrida" 8). God is no longer a basis of faith but rather one to be grasped, if at all, in doubt. This is a trial in nihilism as reality, or in qualification to the incomprehensibility of Job's grasping emptiness, of a creation without "secret". Caputo concludes that we make "use of such materials as have been available to us, forged in the fire of time and circumstance. We do not in some deep way know who we are or what the world is. That is not nihilism but a quasi-religious confession, the beginning of wisdom, the onset of faith and compassion" ("Derrida" 8-9).

What sits here in Hecht's work is a very different exploration of poetry from his New Critical beginnings, involving a passionate and immediate engagement with the question: where does moral evil sit in our human experience? Hecht turns away from a distanced intellectual milieu and faces head-on one of the most significant of human nightmares by imagining and dramatically portraying the consequences of moral evil without reason or recompense. This serious engagement, not just at the personal level, but in testing our commonly shared human values and beliefs, echoes through much of Hecht's work. This engagement marks a significant break from New Criticism, through its references to events which enhance our reading of the poem, its "jump cut" technique, but, most importantly, in its subject matter.

"More Light!, More Light!" is indeed a harrowing poem. Its depictions of witnessed accounts, remembered historical acts and prayers as responses, are woven together in a dramatic conversation with moral evil. Within Hecht's work, though, this conversation is much broader than the historical background of the Holocaust itself. It involves the existence of evil as part of human existence where there seems to be no God. Poems that engage with the vexed issue of theodicy span Hecht's work. This engagement is sustained, substantial and deeply wedded to some of the key post-Holocaust theological discussions about human purpose. Hecht's poems enact this thinking in a dramatic and imaginative way and mirror contemporary theological conversations. *The Hard Hours*, and Hecht's last collection, *The Darkness and the Light*, are at the core of this leitmotif in his work.

I am cautious about attempting to restrict all of Hecht's poetry to being a conversation with evil. Hecht himself criticises such an approach at the beginning of his work on Auden. He

says that he was reluctant to approach any collection of poetry with a prior agenda. This is because “all too often critical inquiries apply Procrustean methods, lopping off something here by cunning omission, labouring a point too heavily there, all on behalf of an a priori thesis to which the poet and his work are tortured into conformity” (Hecht *Hidden Law* 438).

Hecht’s “A Birthday Poem”, for example, and also the lyrics in his final collection indicate a broader canvas to his work (Hecht *Millions* 21). Nevertheless as mentioned, these poems are the basis of his reputation: *The Hard Hours* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1968.

That these poems helped construct Hecht’s reputation is clear when one reads *The Burdens of Formality: Essays on the Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, edited by Sydney Lea. But, in the editor’s own words, the book’s methodology has led to a “disproportionate number of contributors” focussing on “the same few poems” (Lea xiv). Lea notes there is no deliberate “methodicalness”. The themes encompass three separate preoccupations: formality of structure in poetry as a means of dealing with calculated violence and evil; the reconciliation of life after “the fall” of man; and coping with the Holocaust (Lea xiv). The intent of the critical essays published in *The Burdens of Formality* is to demonstrate that, across all these issues, elegance has a purpose enabling the poet to manage the most difficult of subject matters.

Most contributions begin with comments about Hecht’s poetic elegance. In her essay, Alicia Ostriker writes: “One can scarcely avoid noting of Hecht that his stanza patterns are ingenious and his blank verse supple, his learning classical and his milieu cosmopolitan, his language opulent and his wit charming” (Ostriker 98). This impression is then systematically qualified as she praises the work as having a consistent “moral edge” as it is not just the work of “literature”, but also the work of a “pedagogue and a moralist” (Ostriker 98).

Peter Sacks’ contribution develops a sustained investigation of the limits and uses of formal poetry, defining this formality as comprising the poet’s mastery of “syntactic complexities and sinewy uses of paradox” which gives them a “tensile power as well as subtlety” (Sacks “Anthony Hecht’s ‘Rites and Ceremonies’: Reading ‘The Hard Hours’” 65). Sacks concludes that Hecht “refuses to avoid his task and chooses to sing rather than to yield to a mute despair – this is his strength...And that the grave courage of his song should include such a deep attention to its own necessities of form and to the rightness of its sound – this is his

art" (93). Is this continued courageous singing's only purpose to glorify in the life of its sound in the face of despair? As I have mentioned in Chapter One, in "'No room for me': George Herbert and Our Contemporaries", Sacks also suggests, when comparing George Herbert's poem "Deniall" and the "Fire Sermon" from "Rites and Ceremonies", that Hecht is "marking one of the limits of Herbert's imitability in our time, a limit drawn by the absence of divine acknowledgement, and by the inability to transmute historical agony into redemptive martyrdom" (41). Sacks does not go further to interrogate a possible theological perspective. For many contributors, the need for Hecht's formal approach to poetry is seen through a quasi-psychological lens. Kenneth Gross aims to highlight "the rage against loss, against cruelty, against pain; rage that can be self authenticating or self destructing" (Gross 159-60). J.D. McClatchy says of *The Hard Hours* that "darkness and suffering suffuse the book" (McClatchy "Anatomies" 196), and he wonders "if the book's many victims aren't projections of the poet himself" (196).

While the collection makes some profound claims about Hecht's work, it is not "exhaustive" (Lea xiii). While claiming that "formality" in poetic syntax can be pushed "into deeper and more thoughtful enterprises", it only partially shows us how and why (Lea xii). The contributors justify the elegance of Hecht's writing but are also dazzled by its graceful juxtaposition with the subject matter. Formality is seen then as a coping mechanism that enables Hecht to plumb the depths of some of the worst aspects of life. That he uses it to tackle personal trauma, rage and melancholy in the face of evil and calculated cruelty in human experience and still triumph tells only part of the story.

The lasting impact the Holocaust had on Hecht is well documented: it was personal and psychologically damaging (McClatchy "Hecht" 181-82). James Wilson, though, claims more. In "Socrates in Hell: Anthony Hecht, Humanism and The Holocaust", he says that the impact of Hecht's war experiences meant that he, along with many American secular Jewish intellectuals, sought to redefine a "particular humanistic vision deeply attached to the intellectual, cultural and political achievements of the West" (Wilson 148). Certainly it would seem that Hecht was attracted to what is described as the humanism of Terence and Cicero: "I am a man: nothing human is alien to me" (Terence 1.1.25). This humanism, based on Greco-Roman culture, might usefully describe his position. It is also in the Santayana

tradition, whose influence on Hecht has been discussed previously, although perhaps less optimistic. Hecht mentions this connection in his essay on "Poetry and Painting" in *On The Laws of The Poetic Art*, where he likens his approach to the philosopher's position: "George Santayana once characterized himself with the words, 'I am an ignorant man, almost a poet.' And what are poor poets to do following lamely behind him into the thickets and minefields of aesthetic discourse" (Hecht *Poetic Art* 5). David Yezzi argues that Hecht is a "secular moralist" and this moralism is based on "a kind of sceptical humanism that continually weighs biblical teaching with the lessons of art and culture both ancient and modern" (Yezzi 30).

Hecht certainly begins from this premise, but his poems themselves test its veracity. Wilson argues that in the prayer-poems comprising much of *The Hard Hours*, Hecht attempts to recover aesthetic value in religion and humanity, but is unwilling to abandon humanist categories of thought (Wilson 163-64). Human beings, how they act and respond to their situation in the world, are at the centre of his poetic concern. Our moral frailty, our capacity to do evil, and God's divine justice are Hecht's constant questions.

Wilson's approach to Hecht captures my understanding of the poet's debt to Santayana. As Wilson comments: "Santayana...modelled a humbled agnostic form of humanism that did not assert the infinite potential or perfectibility of the human spirit" (Wilson 160). By implication, it means an acceptance of our capacity, as part of our nature and history, to commit acts of great evil, to fail and experience calamities, and to wreak death and destruction.

Identifying in Hecht a "classical humanist position", Wilson mounts an argument that his poetry does not succumb to the articulation of a "purgatory between outrage and resignation" which, he claims, underpins the response to the Holocaust by Adorno and Celan (Wilson 147). Hecht's work on the Holocaust, he says, takes a "greater risk, as they (the poems) affirm the spirit of humanism, of human reason, creativity, and culture" despite all (Wilson 148). He adds:

One can understand the temptation of conventional "ironic" criticism to presume that such imagery undermines the precedent images of beauty in the poems, and

that it ironically negates the exquisite periods and formal stanzas of which Hecht is a modern master. (Wilson 155-56)

But for Wilson, Hecht's poems are also:

The affirmation of mankind as a political animal and of human life as grounded in narrative memory and hope that can only proceed if it is made along with the honest confession of human history as rife with the most repellent of outrageous, massive and brutal acts.

He likens Hecht's early poems to "sophisticated grapplings" with moral evil (Wilson 153). This reading of the poems is subtle, complex and nuanced, taking a value-adding step to earlier treatments of them. These observations are important as they act as a foreword to one of Hecht's major poetic conversations on life's purpose when no divine presence is seen or, at the very least, when such a possible divine presence is incomprehensible, compelling Hecht to ask how the Judaeo-Christian God of Abraham can permit evil as palpable as that of the Holocaust.

I would go further and argue that these poems are at once humanistic and yet theological in nature. There is a tripartite conversation going on: theodicy, moral evil, and humanity's grappling with both. Hecht's poems are not nihilistic; many affirm life in the face of all. Perhaps one of Hecht's greatest achievements is the attempted rescue or justification of meaningfulness in the face of nihilism. This tripartite questioning sits in the framing of Hecht's poems themselves and acts as the internal counterpoint to the explicit poetic language, anchoring them in one of the most challenging theological debates of today. I want now to delineate this framework.

Hecht's substantial study of Auden's poetry takes its title from Auden's poem "The Hidden Law":

The Hidden Law does not deny
Our laws of probability,
But takes the atom and the star
And human beings as they are,
And answers nothing when we lie.

It is the only reason why
 No government can codify,
 And legal definitions mar
 The Hidden Law.

Its utter patience will not try
 To stop us if we want to die:
 When we escape It in a car,
 When we forget It in a bar,
 These are the ways we're punished by
 The Hidden Law.

(Auden 209)

In that book's final chapter, Hecht reflects on the significance of this poem's message. What is this possibly divine but hidden law? This question leads us directly to a consideration of theodicy, defined by the OED as "the vindication of the divine attributes, esp. justice and holiness, in respect to the existence of evil; a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to 'justify the ways of God to men'" (*Oxford "The Oxford English dictionary. Vol. 17. Su - Thrivingly" 895*). The very fact that such a theory is called for is, itself, an index of our general perplexity about the hidden law, signifying our desperate belief that it must exist, as well as our no less desperate frustration at our inability to make it out. Theologians of various persuasions have, of course, "offered us any number of theodicies" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 449).

Hecht's interest in theological meditations concerning the so-called "leap of faith",⁵⁶ bridging the gap between divine and human justice, between meaninglessness and the plenitude of meaning in the divine, is explicit (Kierkegaard *Fear* 42). His poetry expresses a lifelong concern with the theological and meditative aspects of this gap and faith's capacity to translate or inscribe, as Soren Kierkegaard would write, the capacity for meaning in a confrontation with its absence. This confrontation is at the centre of Kierkegaard's ("Johannes de Silentio's") retelling of the Abraham and Isaac story. Such a confrontation is presented at times through a deliberate application of formal poetic techniques with highly-wrought dramatic rubrics and, at other times, a more relaxed, less formal, narrative

⁵⁶ On page 42 of *Fear and Trembling* there is a footnote which refers to this: *Every movement of infinity is carried out through passion, and no reflection can produce a movement. This is the continual leap in existence that explains the movement, whereas mediation is a chimera, which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and which is also the only thing he never has tried to explain.*

approach giving full range to imaginative retellings of history or scripture. It is this imagination (with its capacity to generate possibilities in the face of impossibility or certain death) that is central.

Hecht's discussion of theodicy embraces the work and approach of the Protestant theologian, Kierkegaard. It also has an intimate affinity with the Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar who employs dramatic and poetic re-imaginings of faith in liturgical, spiritual and ethical forms for achieving redemption, even in the face of radical evil.

Kierkegaard's influence is explicit in Hecht's work. At the conclusion of his book on Auden, Hecht refers to the Danish theologian, and specifically to the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham where impossible choices are demanded, and theodicy's hidden law are made stark:

The books of Job and Jonah may be cited for their awesome accounts of divine justice and mercy as altogether mysterious and incomprehensible. They are among the most persuasive and bewildering texts in Holy Scripture, and they discovered their modern analogue in Kierkegaard's sustained meditation on the sacrifice of Isaac and Abraham. They reduce us as once they reduced Job himself to speechless awe and reverence, and resignation. They ruthlessly sever the realms of our normal ethical judgements from the absolute realm of divine justice and show us how feeble and trivial are those instincts as well as those deeply considered meditations we regard (privately or publicly) as our best. They expose the unbridgeable gulf between our values and those of God, and assert there is no comprehending the latter. To this dilemma Kierkegaard's solution is the "leap of faith". But the dilemma itself, unpalliated by any putative remedy is starkly presented again and again in the fiction of Franz Kafka, whose evocation of the hidden law is terrible in its force and authority. (Hecht *Hidden Law* 48)

These questions of theodicy are found not only in the Jewish tradition. The Old Testament story concerning Abraham and Isaac appears in the Qur'an as well, and its significance has been the subject of discussion by theologians in the Protestant and Catholic Christian traditions.

Hecht's comments and poems on divine justice and its import certainly reflect the theological concepts of *Fear and Trembling* where we are presented with the most

pronounced challenge of faith by God, by an act of horrendous transgression. In that book, Kierkegaard's approach—or rather, the approach that has been dramatically realised by his poetic pseudonym—tests his comprehension of the limits of the ethical. This approach has been described as “a teleological suspension of the ethical” where, in looking at the old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac,

the author has vividly comprehended, has deeply felt and expressed, with the full power of language, the horror that must grip a person's soul when he is confronted by a task whose demands he dare not evade and when his understanding is yet unable to disperse the appearance with its demands that seem to call him out from the eternal order to which every being shall submit. (Kierkegaard *Fear* xxxvi, 54)

This power, the speaking about, through language, is crucial. Kierkegaard's language is a particular type of speaking, a poetic one, devoid of logic understanding and where there is no conceivable ethical framework.

Just as relevant as Kierkegaard's theological consideration of this story is the methodology he adopted when speaking of it. *Fear and Trembling* is one of Kierkegaard's “pseudonymous writings” in which he employs a “poet dialectician” as an intermediary, Johannes de Silentio (Kierkegaard *Fear* ix, xvii). Named after the gospel author, he is the poetic religious intermediary of silence—for the understanding of what is silent or unspoken. Kierkegaard often deliberately employed indirect communication:

This has not had an accidental basis in my person...but an essential basis in the production itself, which for the sake of the lines, of the psychologically varied differences of the individualities, poetically required a disregard for good and evil, contrition and exuberance, despair and arrogance, suffering and rhapsody, etc. which are limited only ideally by psychological consistency, which no actual factual person dares allow himself or wishes to allow himself in the moral limitations of actuality. (Kierkegaard *Fear* x)

Kierkegaard saw the freedom afforded in this adoption of separate poetic imaginations within which author and theological contemplation could be closely aligned. The poet, here,

is an imaginative architect who presents the possible in “experimental verisimilitude”: a dramatic acting out (Kierkegaard *Fear* xxv). Ben Jonson’s line, “Speak, that I may see thee”, suggests the power embodied in this type of writing (Jonson *Timber* 62).

Kierkegaard imaginatively and reflectively works through a hypothesis, casting it, and its implications, in a “constructed poetic illusion of experimental actuality” (Kierkegaard *Fear* xxv). Johannes de Silentio is a person imaginatively created who writes “poetically” about ethical, religious issues in the form of an ideal actuality in the imaginatively constructed work *Fear and Trembling*. The poetic framework tests our limits and our capacity to make meaning. Care is needed with this. Kierkegaard is using the pseudonym to distance himself from the meditation. Is it Johannes de Silentio or Kierkegaard who approves of the theological resolution? The name of the pseudonymous writer is also significant: ‘John of Silence’. The story of Abraham and Isaac cannot be explained and ends in silence as a meditation on the inexplicable which paradoxically, in this poetic form, comes to reproduce if not meaning, at least a human mediation. Kierkegaard begins his Isaac and Abraham meditation with a story from the German philosopher Hamann, who offered a critique of reason and the enlightenment, and whom he greatly admired (Kierkegaard *Fear* 3). The story relates to the request from Tarquin’s son to his father as to the fate of the inhabitants of a captured stronghold of the Gabii (Kierkegaard *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, Volume 2: Journals EE-KK* 497). Tarquin does not speak but walks through his garden cutting off the heads of the flowering poppies (Kierkegaard *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks, Volume 2: Journals EE-KK* 497). The son’s messenger does not understand, but the son does and proceeds to execute the Gabii’s leaders (497). As Clare Carlisle writes, the messenger delivers a silent message (Carlisle 26). In fact, Kierkegaard traces to Hamann the basis of his own thesis that faith cannot be comprehended or, alternatively, that faith must not be comprehended. So the essay is doubled-edged: the poet speaks through silence (Kierkegaard *Fear* 149). Poetry is the frame for a meaning which cannot be spoken but indicates some restoration by the divine.

One of the key elements of Kierkegaard’s theology embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. This element shows, through drama, the limits of reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously can be incarnated

as a temporal, finite, human being in the guise of his son. There are two possible attitudes we can adopt with respect to this assertion. We can believe against logic and reason, or we can reject the very notion that such a belief is possible. If we choose faith, we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact, we must believe *by virtue of the absurd* (McDonald). On this basis, we can have faith that, by “virtue of the absurd”, we can still achieve atonement through this being (Kierkegaard *Fear* 35). The absurdity of atonement requires faith to believe that for God, even the impossible is possible, including the forgiveness of the unforgivable. For Kierkegaard, “there is only one guilt that God cannot forgive, that of not willing to believe in his greatness!” (Kierkegaard *Christian Discourses, etc* 302). This apparent contradiction between faith and reason is at the centre of Kierkegaard’s retelling of the story of Isaac and Abraham, where he uses the poetic medium of Johannes de Silentio to imagine a teleological resolution based on a silence that speaks.

Coupled with Kierkegaard’s use of poetic imagination to comprehend divine silence as meaning is the adoption of a dramatic technique as an “apparatus” which acts as a “magnet to align iron filings and assemble them”, that is to say a means to order the inexplicable; an approach taken by Balthasar to grapple with theodicy (Balthasar 9). A dramatic rubric⁵⁷ becomes the means through which we can, or is at the very least a “set of resources” for approaching, this most baffling of questions: an absence of divine meaning (Balthasar 11). It is interesting to note that Peter Steele made similar observations on Hecht’s poem “Auguries of Innocence”, about the gap and necessary dialogue between “how things are and what they mean” (“Chasm” 60).

When discussing why old explanations of theodicy based on the belief that God cannot be anything but good and just, even when we do not understand how, are now inadequate, Balthasar puts it thus:

⁵⁷ I am using rubric in its religious sense, which speaks of the ceremony surrounding certain religious rites as an integral aspect of dialogue with God (The Oxford English Dictionary).

The emphasis changes when, in modern time, the darkness and fragmentation of creation is projected into the divine ground itself and speculation discovers the element of absoluteness in human freedom. Now it is *God* who bears the contradiction (including hell) in himself, and in the same breath, man with *his* contradiction, moves over into the realm of the absolute. Here, as an equal partner with God, he can accuse the world of being contradictory and existence of being meaningless...But now man discovers the world's dark side: aggression, the will to power, reciprocal annihilation and, in the sphere of history, the tragedy of a civilisation which seems to be proceeding towards self-extinction. A light has gone out; the landscape of existence seems drear and alien. At no point can sin's overthrow by Christ's sacrificial death be tangibly grasped; faith is impotent in the face of crushing brute reality. Just as the Christian has to struggle in a new way for the possibility of faith, the non-Christian is presented with this nagging question: is there any other person or factor left to be blamed for the condition of the world or must he regard evil as a mere force of nature? . . .the confrontation between divine and human freedom has reach a unique intensity; the contest between the two has moved into the centre – the really dramatic centre stage – of the problem of existence. (Balthasar 7)

In answering this "problem of existence", he looks to a dramatic dialectic to bridge the chasm between divine and human freedom. This is a bridge where faith is the justification enabling the reader to face the central question of theodicy. He seeks to place the actual contemplation of evil in a dramatic "acting out" central to the nature of the Christian God – to his incarnation, his guise as a human being and as pure suffering love. This enacted narrative underpins and assists our understanding of Christ's death on the Cross and his descent into hell. His inexplicable suffering, within the triune Godhead, in turn, acts as a resolution of, an expiation for the contradiction between divine and human freedom and, in acting the contradiction out, bridges the chasm between the two. Balthasar writes: "What interests us here is the whole phenomenon of theatre: The sheer fact that there is a structured performance and ultimately an actual substance of the play itself" (Balthasar 49). This "play" or drama, I argue, is integral to the way Hecht approaches writing about the Holocaust's moral evil, demonstrating his close affinity with Balthasar's work.

Balthasar coins the word “theo-drama” when seeking an explanation for this modern problem of existence (Balthasar 25). This closely resembles Hecht’s poetic inquiry into radical evil. As Steffan Lösel says, it also “expresses Balthasar’s conviction that history is revealed as a dramatic conflict between the infinite divine will and the finite human will. This conflict emerges with the creation of finite freedom, which implies a self-limitation on the part of god’s own infinite freedom” (Lösel 7). Gerard O’Hanlon S.J., in “The Jesuits and Modern Theology – Rahner, von Balthasar and Liberation Theology”, notes Balthasar’s “essential ambiguity of human experience and, in particular, the prevalence of evil in a century that has lived through the Holocaust” (O’Hanlon SJ 25). For Balthasar the “central human phenomenon of dialogue, of intersubjectivity” is vital, and it is realised in the “self-emptying form of Christ’s love on the cross in its dramatic engagement with the evil and sin of this world” (O’Hanlon SJ 31). For our purposes, this exploration of theodicy, with its dramatic acting out of the question of humanity and moral evil, plays into the poetry of Hecht. He addresses the same questions using the same dramatic approach.

These discussions inform our consideration of Hecht’s work and, I would argue, because of the theological underpinnings, place his work well apart from criticisms of his poems as being mere “over ripe syntax”; or for that matter, from praise for their formal and technical brilliance alone. Hecht is using poetry to ask, dramatically and imaginatively, a fundamental human question. How do we account for the existence of evil?

The “contemplation of evil” and its arbitrariness is prefigured in his first collection *A Summoning of Stones* (Hecht *Hard Hours* 43). While a soldier, Hecht served as part of the Allied occupying forces in Japan at the end of World War Two. A cinema-like dialogue, between perception and imagination, over time, distance, and a considered reflection on the symbiotic nature of virtue and evil, are adroitly balanced within his poem “Japan”, which was published in that collection. As a child and at a distance, the Japanese are seen as “miniature” and their country, the “Home of the Short” (Hecht *Summoning* 10). The peculiarly cramped look of the Japanese alphabet and the association with Christmas toys add to the distortion. Now that Hecht is a member of the occupation forces, his childhood perceptions give way to adult assumptions and experience. Before his arrival, Hecht has

been briefed that the Japanese were “Sharpened for treachery compounding in their brains/Like mating weasels” (Hecht *Summoning* 10).

But perhaps the more disturbing image of this nascent evil is its subterranean element: “Deeper than dyes of atabrine”. Atabrine turns the skin yellow. When administered in small doses it is beneficial in curing malaria, but in large quantities it is deadly (Hecht *Summoning* 10). The actual experience of the occupation is different:

And yet they bowed us in with ceremony,
Told us what brands of Sake were the best,
Explained their agriculture in a phoney
Dialect of the West,
Meant vaguely to be understood
As a shy sign of brotherhood
In the old human bondage to the facts
Of day-to-day existence. And like ants,
Signaling tiny pacts
With their antennae, they would wave their hands.

(Hecht *Summoning* 11)

Common humanity transcends childhood or indeed adult views based on second-hand briefings. First-hand experience highlights the obsequiousness of the conquered and that they are, in their quotidian occupations, like us. Stanzas move in and out like camera lenses changing focus. They have the quality of different scenes in a drama played out in the mind’s eye. This is the first expression of a technique Hecht went on to use commonly in later poems. As Scupham says in “Grisaille and Millefleurs”, “Hecht’s brocades are not still tapestries but swaying curtains: tentative or suggestive drop scenes leading to the surprising human event after we have been entranced into watching, feeling, waiting” (Scupham 15). The sinister is also present, though:

Human endeavour clumsily betrays
 Humanity. Their excrement served in this;
 For, planting rice in water, they would raise
 Schistosomiasis
 Japonica, that enters through
 The pores into the avenue
 And orbit of the blood, where it may foil
 The heart and kill, or settle in the brain.
 This fruit of their nightsoil
 Thrives in the skull, where it is called insane.

(Hecht *Summoning* 11)

The complex nature of man is all-encompassing. To be alive is to be both good and evil, for there is no “either /or”. The last stanza looks back on his childhood perceptions of Japan and how wrong they turned out to be:

Now the quaint early image of Japan
 That was so charming to me as a child
 Seems like a bright design upon a fan,
 Of water rushing wild
 On rocks that can be folded up,
 A river which the wrists can stop
 With a neat flip, revealing merely sticks
 And silk of what had been a fan before,
 And like such winning tricks,
 It shall be buried in excelsior.

(Hecht *Summoning* 12)

A shift from jejune and naive assumptions to the potent and deadly is achieved by the “neat flip” of the wrist. Rose-tinted views of mankind are disposed of in excelsior, a product made of wood slivers cut from logs and mainly used in packaging. The popular name for excelsior is “wood wool” a contradiction of materials reflecting the poem itself. But the image has a further point to make. Excelsior is the Latin for “ever upward” and is also the sign of the rising sun: the emblem of the Japanese flag throughout the war. Children’s toys are packed away but are changed in the process to become emblems of death and destruction.

No attempted resolution is made in this poem, unlike Hecht's subsequent investigations of evil in our world.

The use and duality of this last word *excelsior* is no accident. Emblems (fans or dolls) and signs do not reveal the humanity they purport to embody or signify. This stanza reminds us that the potential for death and destruction is in us all, for what grows rice can harbour disease and slow death.

If the evil dwelling in the soil is a harbinger of Hecht's ongoing attraction to considering evil, as part of the human condition, "Christmas Is Coming" heralds his future determination to speak directly to, and about, the extremes of fear and the horror of war with its violence. In this poem, pain is a welcome sign of life as he recalls his experiences of a night patrol in Germany in World War Two:

Where is the pain? The sense has frozen up,
And fingers cannot recognise the grass,
Cannot distinguish their own character,
Being blind with cold, being stiffened by the cold;
Must find out thistles to remember pain.
Keep to the frozen ground or else be killed.
Yet crawling one encounters in the dark
The frosty carcasses of birds, their feet
And wings all glazed. And still we crawl to learn
Where pain was lost, how to recover pain.
Reach for the brambles, crawl to them and reach,
Clutching for thorns, search carefully to feel.

(Hecht *Summoning* 31-32)

The poem's impact depends on Hecht's capacity to re-tell the memory of crawling in the dark in below zero temperatures, where pain is an affirmation of life.

James Wilson speaks of Hecht's early poetry as being a "meditative and humane corrective...because it addresses the unbearable violence out of which human history is stitched" (Wilson 147). Certainly, both "Japan" and "Christmas Is Coming" anticipate themes to which Hecht gives greater attention and scope in following collections. In both poems, Hecht further develops his thinking about what poetry might express in the face of irrational

and unchecked violence. Wilson claims that this development captures “a humbled, agnostic form of humanism that did not assert the infinite potential or perfectibility of the human spirit, but rather sought to establish the value of human life and limitations of human powers” (Wilson 160). His argument is that Hecht’s poetry should be read not only as “ironic elegance – where irony exposes the darkness and moral void upon which the forms blithely dance” -- but as texts that may “transform the trauma of experience” (Wilson 154).

As stated, my contention is that in both *The Hard Hours* and *The Darkness and the Light* Hecht tests our response to the Holocaust and, more generally, evil in our world, where the impossible choices in life are joined to the possibility that there is no meaning. He acts out dramatically and imaginatively a conversation on our nature in the world, replete with personal imperfection, disappointment, failure and great moral evil, where the solace of a divine presence is not a given.

This question of life’s purpose was addressed in an interview with *The Formalist’s* editor William Baer, who put to Hecht that his poems, particularly in *The Hard Hours*, were in danger of embracing nihilism and despair and asked how he guarded against doing so.

Hecht’s response to this inquiry is informative:

No, I don’t think I guard against that consciously, nor do I think of it as a temptation. Nihilism seems to me, in fact, sort of lax. It’s like lying down and saying, “I’m not even going to bother to write this damn poem.” That would be nihilism. No, I think what Richard Howard points to and what I recognise in myself is a kind of very strong almost embarrassing puritan streak which feels that it is impossible to look at existence, even at its most joyful without remembering that there are other people at the same time – and keeping that double vision in mind is difficult. It often prevents any kind of free spontaneous happiness untainted by that knowledge, because the knowledge is always at least unconsciously there, and in my case, very consciously there. My poems often try to take all that worst part of existence into account and then try to find something redemptive in it. (Baer 73)

He does not shy away from the question “is that all there is?” Hecht insists that the answer to this question might lie in an unflinching contemplation of evil in human behaviour and unbearable personal failure. He does not accept that the discovered or historically recorded evidence must necessarily eradicate the purpose of life. From *The Hard Hours* on we have a rich questioning of this, which moves beyond the Holocaust.

I am aware that in the above passage, Hecht is speaking to the editor of a magazine that promotes a particular approach to poetics with which he is closely associated: hence the quote’s reference to the balance that an awareness of despair brings to happiness. But his comments to Baer also refer to two important components of his work. He qualifies the nihilist reading of even his bleakest poems, claiming he finds something redemptive in them. He also raises the issue of “knowledge”, conscious or unconscious, based on the recollection of events and experience. Knowledge looks to the future but it also informs the way in which he writes, drawing from a deep well of cultural cross-references and sources that bring historical context and extra resonance to his work. In a similar way, Balthasar invokes history as the continuous enclosing loop between divine will and human freedom, around which life can be enacted with purpose (Balthasar 29).

Hecht’s contemplation of evil is set within memory and within historical contexts. As Wilson says, “If we can transform the trauma of experience into the mourning of memory, we can come, although perhaps not to a comprehension, to at least an apprehension of these acts, these murders” (Wilson 154). Life goes on and we reflect on the totality of its experiences.

This point is touched on in his “Poem upon the Lisbon Disaster: Or, An Inquiry Into The Adage, ‘All Is For The Best’” (1977). This piece is based on Voltaire’s poem of the same name:

The past is but a memory of despair,
The present ghastly if it points nowhere,
If the grave enfolds our spirit with our dust.
“Some days things will be well,” there lies our
trust.
“All’s well today,” is but the Second
Of the deluded; God alone knows all.
With humble sighs, resigned to pain, I raise
No shout or arrogant challenge to God’s ways.

(Hecht *Millions* 72)

The lines echo Auden's "The Hidden Law" and speak of the imperfect hope that evil will be overcome, while acknowledging that it is part of the human condition (Auden 209). The lines also draw on Voltaire's derision at the arbitrary injustice that has befallen Lisbon's inhabitants:

And can you then impute a sinful deed
To babes who on their mothers' bosoms bleed?
Was then more vice in fallen Lisbon found,
Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?
Was less debauchery to London known,
Where opulence luxurious holds the throne?

(Voltaire 99)

Voltaire's poem questions the unfairness of the tragedy meted out to the young innocents and compares this with the "debauchery" of Paris and London where, by all rights, punishment is justified. How can this contradiction happen? In his interview with Hoy, Hecht addresses this issue of evil by saying: "I would summon to my aid Hardy's apology from "In Tenebris": 'If a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst' (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 58). In his poem called "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters", Wallace Stevens writes, "It is here, in this bad, that we reach // The last purity of the knowledge of good" (Stevens 293-94) The questions Hecht asks drive him to question God's justice, human disappointment and frailty. Evil is internalised dramatically within the Stevens couplet in a similar way to Balthasar's dramatic explanation of theodicy.

Hecht's struggle with moral evil had already found expression in the Judaic traditions of the Old Testament's *The Book of Job*. In that text, Job, a righteous man, is abandoned by God:

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said,

“The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you”. (NRSV 1:13-19)

For Hecht, the Holocaust again throws into question the place of the Jewish race as God's chosen people. As with Job and his family in the Old Testament, God again appears to have abandoned the Jews to irrational evil and its consequences. Hecht imagines himself, as the new “messenger” escaped from the gas chamber, telling the reader of its horror. Technical elegance and erudite cultural references are rooted not just in a serious, sustained contemplation of evil, but in an attempt to define our necessary responses to it; responses that are worked through dramatic and ceremonial language. To explore this theological and poetic dialogue, I move now to consider *The Hard Hours*.

The richness of *The Hard Hours* lies in the use of memory and prayer, in stepping outside witnessed events, to comprehend evil. Hecht both imagines being in horrific events and speaks dramatically about them. These poems also establish the seeds of a growing preoccupation with Old Testament hermeneutics, evident in Hecht's later work. This bifocal view of life is prefigured in the collection's first poem, “A Hill”.

Dante's ghost is summoned in the poem. *Inferno* begins after the poet has emerged from a dark and foreboding forest to “un colle” as Virgil leads him into hell (Alighieri 1.57-61). Hecht took particular care to set the tone for his collections in his first poems, and “A Hill” is no exception. Post suggests that this poem heralds a “broader transformation of Hecht from primarily a descriptive to a dramatic poet whereby the poet situates himself in a place or landscape, and, without writing confessional poetry per se, uses that space to reveal his thinking” (Post 53). The poem's canvas is split between the “gestures of exultation” emanating from stalls in the piazza abutting the Palazzo Farnese and the “mole colored and bare” hill north of Poughkeepsie:

In Italy, where this sort of thing can occur,
 I had a vision once – though you understand
 It was nothing at all like Dante's, or the vision of saints,
 And perhaps not a vision at all. I was with some friends,
 Picking my way through the warm sunlit piazza
 In the early morning. A clear fretwork of shadows
 From huge umbrellas littered the pavement and made
 A sort of lucent shallows in which was moored
 A small navy of carts. Books, coins, old maps,
 Cheap landscapes and ugly religious prints
 Were all on sale. The colors and noise
 Like the flying hands were gestures of exultation,
 So that even the bargaining
 Rose to the ear like a voluble godliness.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 2)

Dante's Christian vision is expressly put aside despite the poem being set in a country awash with religious apparitions. Secular accoutrements of "books, coins, old maps" are imagined to be in water's "lucent shallows" free from grounded observation, allowing daydreams and a supernatural free play. "Colors and noise" lift the spirit in exultation which, if not specifically Catholic, is tinged with godliness evoking a eudaemonic response to this noisy market life. Associations are grounded in material artefacts and the senses. Imagination is triggered by them. The description is joyful and disarming. The sun's light lifts colours, energizes activities and vitalizes the haggling. This is a good place to be.

This vibrant scene gives way to one of cold silence. The sun's light is replaced by darkness and "people dissolved". Civilization in the shape ("for all its marble") of the Farnese Palace, is removed. The new landscape is in stark contrast to the joyous riot of the piazza. What is now recollected in the mind's eye is bleak:

...a Hill, mole colored and bare. It was very cold,
 Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.
 The trees were like old ironwork gathered for scrap
 Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,
 And the only sound for a while was the little click
 Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.
 I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a hedge,
 But no other sign of life. And then I heard
 What seemed the crack of a rifle. A hunter, I guessed;
 At least I was not alone. But just after that
 Came the soft and papery crash
 Of a great branch somewhere unseen falling to earth.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 2)

Silence, cold and utter isolation are in stark contrast to the opening's noise and colour. This scene is the *Doppelgänger* of the opening. But it is just as much a part of life as the market's chaos. The sounds that are registered, the "little click", the "crack" of a suspected huntsman's rifle, the "papery crash" of an unseen tree branch, all amplify the silence. Faint hints that life, suggested by the "snagged" ribbon, could be present remain possibilities and never materialize. The juxtaposition is deliberate and plays into the notion that contrasts between dark and light add to the appreciation and understanding of the other. "Colors and noise" ram home the "plain bitterness" of the "cold and silence" (Hecht *Hard Hours* 2). It also resurrects a long forgotten childhood memory:

All this happened about ten years ago,
 And it hasn't troubled me since, but at last, today,
 I remembered that hill; it lies just to the left
 Of the road north of Poughkeepsie; and as a boy
 I stood before it for hours in wintertime.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 2-3)

There is something more to this surfacing of a childhood memory than "accepted psychological categories - memories, hallucinations", as Hoy puts it (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 57). In the same interview, Hecht says the image of the hill gave him the means "to express a desolation of the soul" and "a deep sense of despair" (Hecht *in Conversation with*

Hoy 58). There is no comfort, only dread, and what is equally important is the bitter vision imagined and created. Indeed, unlike others in the collection, this poem, offers no hope. It sets the proposition to be explored.

In *The Burdens of Formality*, Peter Sacks writes:

“A Hill” portrays a far more frightening and antithetical dispossession – a seizure by the returning perception of a scene of such menacing blankness that it threatens to rip apart those very fabrics of consciousness, society, or art that might have been designed in part to cover its adversarial reality. Yet the scene is eventually recognised, and it is given both its moment in the time of childhood and its geographical place. The mind also comes to repossess a portion of its own experience, however devastating. Furthermore there is an undeniable empowerment in the very ability to sweep away the entire realm of Roman piazza and marble palace and to confront us so immediately with their drastic replacement...the poet thus signals one of his powers as being that of making such radical substitutions or regressions, suggesting perhaps that his art will return to the unadorned grounds preceding those of art. Henceforth, no marble palaces will be allowed to exist without the eclipsing awareness of an unaccommodatingly bare hill. No social or aesthetic forms will be free from personal recognitions of desolation. (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 69)

Sacks’ perceptive reading suggests that Hecht’s response was a personal and psychological one:

Curiously the gradual return from the revelatory scene to the sunlight market is marked by the latter’s own fragmentation...as if the fabric, like that of the self, can neither be perfectly restored nor regarded as anything but a fragile assemblage of discrete elements. (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 71).

Sacks rightly concludes that “Few poets have formally addressed such an uncompromising challenge; for in many respects such questions of menace not only question the possibilities of art, but also the very lives we seek to construct above the bare grounds of desolation” (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 72). For him, the entire collection brings to mind the catharsis of Oedipus which “requires nothing short of his own annihilation” ((Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 72). Certainly, it is an articulate, active search to comprehend despair and evil: but does that “catharsis” necessarily lead to “annihilation”?

In an early essay on poetry, Hecht would seem to push this proposition further:

In any case the constructs of the poet undertake to reconcile for a moment what is natively inharmonious, dissonant, wayward and incommensurate, and they do not always have to provide us with a response. Often enough their configurations are based precisely on tension, and on tension at a terrible and perilous pitch.....And at last, allowing us to contemplate, even within a single poem, such diversity of experience, both the good and the bad, brought into tenuous balance through all manifold of devices of art, the spirit is set at ease by a kind of catharsis, in which we are brought to acknowledge this is the way things are, and by which is recovered for us at the end the inexhaustible plenitude of the world (Hecht "Methods" 505).

Here, Hecht’s “catharsis” is a little more optimistic, ending, not just in passive acceptance but perhaps in a recovery of our capacity to see the inexhaustible variety of life. Hecht later added to this view in the interview with Baer already referred to (Baer 73). He does raise the legitimate doubt of poetry’s efficacy after the Holocaust, but does not succumb to the silence implied by Adorno.

The next set of poems certainly contain elements of articulate eviscerating despair so elegantly considered in *Burdens of Formality* but, on many occasions, these poems play directly into the belief that to continue writing, despite all, is a source of resolution in itself. They set up an internal dialogue which reflects Kierkegaard’s leap of faith and Balthasar’s theo-dramatics. In other words faith allows us to imagine some resolution of this

contradiction and the dramatic articulation of this in ceremony and language (in this case writing) provides the bridge for this to be achieved. Hecht's poems deal with nihilism of the most extreme kind, but work towards a type of redemption in their reaffirmation of purpose. "Rites and Ceremonies", a searingly traumatic poem, offers some insight into how this writing is undertaken when speaking about genocide. This is a poem reflecting shocking personal experience interlaced with prayer and formal diction. The piece is complex, with references, not just to biblical texts, but to Eliot's poems "The Waste Land" and *Four Quartets*. "Rites and Ceremonies" also echoes Herbert's poetry in his search for God in the face of divine rejection and Auden's theodicy expressed in "The Hidden Law". The title of the collection, with its echo of the medieval *Book of Hours*, helps construct this as a set of poems that are framed as witness, prayer and life cycle. The first part is titled "The Room": a direct reference to the gas chambers of the concentration camps. This part begins with a supplicant's prayer:

Father, adonoi, author of all things,
 of the three states,
 the soft light on the barn at dawn,
 a wind that sings
 in the bracken, fire in the iron gates,
 the ram's horn,
 Furnisher, hinger of heaven, who bound
 the lovely Pleiades,
 entered the perfect treasures of the snow,
 established the round
 course of the world, birth death and disease
 and caused to grow
 veins, brain, bones in me, to breathe and sing
 fashioned me air,
 Lord, who, governing cloud and waterspout,
 o my King,
 held me alive till this my forty-third year –
 In whom we doubt –
 Who was that child of whom they tell
 in lauds and threnes?
 whose holy name all shall pronounce
 Emmanuel,
 which being interpreted means,
 "Gott mit uns?"

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 38)

The opening stanza is one of evocation. The first line echoes Corinthians 8:6, Psalm 103, and the title of a sermon by John Adams (United States president and founding father) on theodicy (Adams). This line has a similar rhythm of the Litanies of The Saints and Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition. The “three states” summon the nature of matter itself: gas, liquid and solid. “The ram’s horn” is the Shofar of the Old Testament, the sound of which is intended to awaken a Higher Mercy to bewilder and stagger Satan. The prayer declares that God’s divine power can encompass pagan traditions as well, naming the “Pleiades” as within his control. He is the alpha and omega (“lauds and threnes”) of existence. The summons is personal, as this God has sustained the speaker for forty-three years and has “fashioned” the air he breathes; his very corporeal being. “Doubt” is also present. This is not an evocation that is unrealistically ecstatic or optimistic. The steady majestic movement of the lines and the alternating lengths grounds the majestic movement. Emmanuel, the name for God made flesh in Isaiah 7:14, and also Mathew 1:23, is invoked and is joined with the personal supplication. The translation into German is deliberate, the question mark menacing. The great weight of western Christian and Jewish cultural references is brought to bear, with the might of western civilisation conscripted to give the prayer gravitas and power. This is a prayer to an all-powerful deity that encompasses all religious manifestations, Christian, Jewish and Pagan, summoning God to witness and explain what is to unfold.

The second part of this first section begins with the speaker’s recollections on entering a concentration camp. The antiphonal opening changes to a personal account which is in conversational, halting uneven lines. Even so, each octave has an alternate rhyming pattern. We are taken through the gates of the camp where the “Iron Cross” of Christ is summoned but depicted on the belt buckle of a dead “Blond and boyish” German soldier (Hecht *Hard Hours* 38). The cross is a sign of “the child, the grave, worship and loss,” and is juxtaposed to the sensed violence of “Gun powder heavy as pollen in winter air” (Hecht *Hard Hours* 38). There is no pollen in winter; the setting is unnatural. Pollen is the beginnings of new growth; gun powder the sign of violence and death. The impact on the witness is profound:

It is twenty years now, Father. I have come home.
 But in the camps, one can look through a huge square
 Window, like an aquarium, upon a room
 The size of my livingroom filled with human hair.
 Others have shoes, or valises
 Made mostly of cardboard, which once contained
 Pills, fresh diapers. This is one of the places
 Never explained.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 39)

The supplication to the “Father” demands He give an answer to “how can this happen” as the signs of life are disaggregated into rooms. The personal account is contrasted to the psalm prayer of the first part. The only formality in the text is that of the rhymes. Troubling aspects of theodicy are emphasised. The horror in such discarded artefacts is “never explained”.

Hecht was a member of a liberation regiment at Flossenbug (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 26; McClatchy "Hecht" 181). He was confronted with moral evil and a failure of explanation at the most intimate of levels. This genocide was carried out by men. Hecht recounts that, as he interviewed some captured SS personnel, he “presented them with the charges levelled against them, translating their denials or defences back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible”, but to no avail (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 26).

As Peter Sinclair observes, the opening sections do resemble the opening of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” in its “movement from formal tone to colloquial speech” (Sinclair). Yet Sinclair also claims that “Rites and Ceremonies” finds it “more difficult to achieve the transcendent timelessness of ‘Four Quartets’ or even the possibility of peace that transcends a deracinated world intimated at the end of ‘The Waste Land’”. I would suggest there is more.

To elaborate on that last point, the poem features the inclusion of children, which is difficult to bear. If, however, we understand the sequence as an extended prayer, then there is perhaps a different reading also available. As Sinclair points out: “Prayer becomes a gesture of survival, the voice of trauma crying out in a safe and familiar vehicle” (Sinclair). I would add that perhaps the very act of praying is, in and of itself, an activity of hope.

The following octet measures the significant, singular impact and the cultural context, discussed in Chapters One and Two, of this witnessed genocide. In doing so, the octet demonstrates the place in history of such events and that this history can speak of continued survival:

Out of one trainload, about five hundred in all,
 Twenty the next morning were hopelessly insane.
And some there be that have no memorial,
That are perished as though they had never been.
 Made into soap.
 Who now remembers "The Singing Horses of Buchenwald"?
 "Above all the saving of lives", whispered the Pope.
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 39)

Ecclesiasticus 44:9 is evoked, recalling the prophecy of great human destruction and humiliation. The Holocaust is one example of a much larger chain of tragedies through which humanity moves and survives. But facing the holocaust is a precarious tightrope, and, without historical context, the moment would be unbearable.

"Made into soap" is a blunt depiction of what the passage directly above means. The *Buchenwald Concentration Camp, 1937-1945: A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition* (2004) explains that inmates were forced to pull a wagon and sing, being nicknamed the "singing horses" (Buchenwald 90). The fraught position of Pius XII, who refused to condemn the Jewish genocide, is also recalled, along with a line from Germany's national poet, "*Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde*" (Goethe 59), implying that the German nation was also complicit. All these references swirl in the vortex of grief. These exemplars of civilization, culture and religion are gathered into bundles of wood for an all-consuming pyre and reduced to a three-word line "Made into soap". Thick intertextual references act like an intellectual hammer blow. The rhyming of "Pope" and "soap", "Buchenwald" and "Walde" and "all" and "*memorial*" together reinforce the collapse of good into evil. This moral evil that defies explanation is real, along with the grief.

Moving from the historical record's context to personal immersion, the next octave recounts the continued trauma the speaker suffers because of what he has witnessed:

But for years the screaming continued, night and day,
 And the little children were suffered to come along, too.
 At night, Father, in the dark, when I pray,
 I am there, I am there. I am pushed through
 With the others to the strange room
 Without windows; whitewashed walls, cement floor.
 Millions, Father, millions have come to this pass,
 Which a great church has voted to "deplore."

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 39)

In an interview with McClatchy, Hecht says he was not capable of understanding the actual suffering or the experiences of those in the concentration camps (McClatchy "Hecht" 22). Yet this octave does, in clear, repeated exclamations, refer to the speaker being present. Sacks notes that "the psychological imperative and the historical horror to which it is bound resists the curative context of religious consolation" (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 83). Thus, the experience is an "endless captivity". The only lines not to maintain the rhyming pattern are five and seven, where the title of the section "room", or the gas chamber itself is recalled with the suggestion that such a place is a gateway to death: "this pass". There is also the recollected bitterness that Pius XII preferred to remain politically neutral. Even so, as a person who has imaginatively been in the room, Hecht has survived to bear witness to this atrocity. Sacks' view presupposes that prayer does not bring with it salvation, and there is only an end without resolution. This is said though by a survivor and witness. What if the praying itself is the generator of a belief that, even in the face of such nihilistic circumstances, life can be lived and can go on? This writing on is, in the poetic prayers themselves and their imagined re-enactments, similar to Kierkegaard's use of imagined dramatic characters such as Johannes de Silentio, who explore similar conditions. It is the language of prayer that allows the speaker to live and survive the events, making the horror retellable.

The final octave recounts the moment of death, the bewildering panic recorded by William Schirer in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960:

Are the vents in the ceiling, Father, to let the spirit depart?
 We are crowded in here naked, female and male.
 An old man is saying a prayer. And now we start
 To panic, to claw at each other, to wail
 As the rubber-edged door closes on chance and choice.
 He is saying a prayer for all whom this room shall kill.
*"I cried unto the Lord God with my voice,
 And He has heard me out of His holy hill."*

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 39)

Clearly, we could believe that it is not only the spirit that departs through the vents, but all hope in any future. Yet the lines leave open a double interpretation of either the spirit being freed, allowed to escape, or there being no freedom to be had in this room with a "rubber-edged door", whose closing denies internees and us, as witnesses, any hope.

In the midst of this, a prayer is made as if the extremity of the situation demands no other recourse. Prayers are the voice of the spirit transcending a materialist humanism that fails in the face of this killing room.

The same octave closes with Psalm 3:4: a plea for the Lord to hear the distress of David. The juxtaposition of this prayer's confident hope with the certain knowledge that this room "shall kill" all those in it, is the fulcrum upon which "The Room" balances and there is no certain answer to its stability. Sacks describes this ending as a "desperate tension" that raises "questions about the existence of God and salvation" (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 84). Sinclair takes a slightly less pessimistic view of this juxtaposition, saying that "prayer becomes a gesture of survival, the voice of trauma crying out in a safe and familiar vehicle" (Sinclair). He claims that "Hecht imagines surviving extermination and testifying to the old man's hopeless prayers" (Sinclair).

The second part of "Rites and Ceremonies", "The Fire Sermon", mirrors "The Room's" structure. The first begins with a prayer and ends with a soliloquy. The second begins with a soliloquy and ends with a prayer and in doing so, resembles the light and dark of "A Hill". "The Fire Sermon" takes its title from the third section of Eliot's "The Waste Land" and asks

similar questions about the possibility of salvation (Eliot *Collected* 81-79). But there is a bitterness to the use of Eliot's framework, reflecting Hecht's own difficulties with Eliot's anti-Semitic proclivities (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 95-96).

The place of Jews as the "others" of western civilisation is made clear as the subject of the section recounts their persecution for being the supposed carriers and perpetrators of the Black Death. Hecht relies heavily on the account of its spread, across Western Europe, as told in *The Treasury of Knowledge and Library of Reference* published in 1834, compiled and written by Goold Brown and Lyman Cobb (Brown and Cobb). It recounts the visit of the King of Thracia to Clement VI at Avignon in the belief that the disease that swept over his kingdom from the east might be halted if he and his people converted to Christianity. The King finds that Christians too have the plague and returns home.

This narrative is interwoven with two elements. There are the images that capture the slow insidiousness of the plague: "In blue shadows, trailing towards the town.//Beginning at the outposts, the foxtrot of death," or, "At the horse trough, at dusk,//In the morning among the fish baskets,//The soft print of the dancing master's foot." These are images searching for a cause or reason: "Was it a judgement?...How could it be a judgement?", where even children were not immune (Hecht *Hard Hours* 40-41). Logic and reason demand an identifiable cause for such death and malevolence. After the confession of a Jew named Agimet in 1348 who, under torture, admitted that he had poisoned wells, it was only a matter of time before the persecution commenced: "Presently it was found to be//Not a judgment" (Hecht *Hard Hours* 41).

Hecht focuses on the massacre of 16,000 Jews in Strasbourg in February 14th, 1349 (Hecht *Hard Hours* 42; Green), juxtaposed with the façade of Strasbourg Cathedral, the seat of learning which bestowed on Goethe his doctorate. Beauty and learning form a stark backdrop to the savagery of the pogrom. The setting, the search for cause and reason, demonstrates the historical position Jews had within Western culture. They are outsiders to be irrationally feared, and the poem describes the utterly illogical premise upon which it is based. Genocide is not a one-off event. The Jewish race is eternally cursed and the epithet of "God's chosen people" is mocked. This is an incessant destruction of a race over the

course of history that defies any notion of prayer or indeed a God that can be comprehended. Again, the second section of the “Fire Sermon” reverts to prayer:

It is barren hereabout
 And the wind is cold,
 And the sound of prayer, clamour of curse and shout
 Is blown past the sheepfold
 Out of hearing.

The river worms through the snow plain
 In kindless darks.
 And man is born to sorrow and to pain
 As surely as the sparks
 Fly upward.

Father among these many souls
 Is there not one
 Whom thou shalt pluck for love out of the coals?
 Look, look, they have begun
 To douse the rags.

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
 To cry to thee,
 And then not heare it crying! Who is strong
 When the flame eats his knee?
 O hear my prayer,

And let my cry come unto thee.
 Hide not thy face.
 Let there some child among us worthy be
 Here to receive thy grace
 And sheltering.

It is barren hereabout
 And the wind is cold,
 And the crack of the fire, melting of prayer and shout
 Is blown past the sheepfold
 Out of hearing.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 42-43)

Elevated language heralds the ceremonial place of prayer and the varying line lengths imitate the flicker of the flames engulfing their victims. Post has noted that Hecht “copied” from Herbert “the number of stanzas, the line patterns, the unusual rhyme scheme (ABABX)”, and “even some of Herbert’s phrases and spelling practices” (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 64). The first and last stanzas are the same except for the third lines. Whereas the first stanza places the “sound of prayer” at the foreground, the final replaces it with the crack of fire which has consumed the living and their cries. Only the witness can speak.

Resolution and relief from suffering are “Out of hearing”. The bleak two-foot lines close off each stanza and become shorthand for the poem’s content. There are two types of speakers here: those burning, and the witness to the carnage. “Man is born to sorrow and to pain” evokes childbirth, as retold in the Old and New Testaments. The tussle between faith and despair is stark.

The praying continues, though, in the silence of not being heard. The reality is that to measure divine will against the human freedom to choose evil may be impossible. While prayer may be insufficient to get a response, it is the only thing we have. Balthasar suggests that Christ’s descent into hell bridges the irreconcilabilities of human freedom to commit vile acts and divine will. Kierkegaard imagines a balancing of the irreconcilables. The ceremonial structure of prayer, for Hecht, is the means by which he can acknowledge the contradiction and continue.

Part Three of “Rights and Ceremonies”, “The Dream”, begins with the much-quoted lines: “The contemplation of horror is not edifying, // Neither does it strengthen the soul” (Hecht *Hard Hours* 43). Sacks says that these lines demonstrate Hecht’s continued “compulsion to witness” (Sacks “Anthony Hecht’s ‘Rites and Ceremonies’: Reading ‘The Hard Hours’” 86). I would argue that they do more. They affirm the capacity to speak about traumatic events through the ceremonial rubric of prayer, thus mastering “historical contingency rather than become its plaything” (Sinclair). There must be more than nihilism, which Hecht has explicitly rejected. We are presented with a catalogue of the grotesque deaths meted out to early Christian martyrs:

St Lucy, bearing her eyes on a plate,
 St Cecilia, whose pipes were the pipes of plumbing
 And whose music was live steam,
 The gridiron tilting lightly against the sleeve of
 St Lawrence,
 These, and others, bewilder and shame us.
 Not all among us are of their kind.
 Fear of our own imperfections,
 Fear learned and inherited,
 Fear shapes itself in dreams
 Not more fantastic than the brute fact.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 43)

Martyrdom is unnatural. The iconography surrounding these gruesome deaths is often complex and contradictory. Lucy's eyes are on a platter, but she holds the palm branch indicating victory over evil. St Cecilia dies by steam emanating from bath pipes but is the patron saint of music. St Lawrence, killed by fire and cooking utensil, is the saint for the poor, providing food to them. The repetition of "Fear" distinguishes us not as cowards but as human beings. The fear the speaker has to contend with is twofold, for there is no salvation and he, as a Jew, has to comprehend genocide. As Luanne Castle writes: "Evil is evil to Hecht, and only God can redeem this – but God is out of hearing range" (Castle 101). The iconography of the saints and martyrs, is frequently a contradiction and is difficult to comprehend. This is the essential fault line within the fraught concept of theodicy: God's justice is not human justice, and man's free will defies the all-knowing and always good God.

The following section describes an event reported by Gladys Dickinson in her book *Du Bellay in Rome*.

On the Monday and Tuesday before Lent races were run in the streets, particularly along the Corso...naked old men, naked Jews, young men on horseback, on buffaloes and on donkeys; buffaloes led by a cord attached to a ring in their nostrils were pricked on by horsemen using spears and by men on foot using goads. (Dickinson 72)

The elegant stanzas are five lines of an a,b,b,a,b and a,b,a,a,b rhyming patters. Mardi Gras is a time of licentiousness: "Here are the *dolces*, here the inebriate wines// Before the seemly austerities of Lent" where..."Anointed Folly and his bride//Ordain Misrule...". Du Bellay was

in the service of his cardinal uncle and saw his Roman sojourn as somewhat of a disappointment. Known for his finely wrought sonnets describing Rome's past glories, Du Bellay is also described as being jaundiced and unconcerned that the races involved the whipping of Jews:

Du Bellay, poet, take no thought of them;
And yet they too are exiles, and have said
Through many generations, long since dead,
"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,..."
Still, others have been scourged and buffeted

And worse. Think rather, if you must,
Of Piranesian, elegaic woes,
Rome's grand declensions, that all-but-speaking dust.
Or think of the young gallants and their lust.
Or wait for the next heat, the buffaloes.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 45)

Du Bellay takes comfort in immersing himself in the glories of ancient Rome; "that all-but-speaking dust." He sees no similarity between his exile and that of the Jews. The civilised poet of the Pléïade retreats to a classical past or is distracted by the next event. Du Bellay is bitterly condemned for such a response. This is suggested by the parenthetical "if you must" and the equating of "lust" "dust" and "buffaloes". The comfort of civilization is questioned, and to ignore the brutalities that abound even at the heart of the "eternal city" is unacceptable. We are not permitted the comfort of civilisation as distraction, no matter how attractive. As this sequence of poems progresses, all exits from the harsh reality of evil are blocked.

The trauma and guilt associated with survival are well documented. The final part of "Rites and Ceremonies" would deny us any relief from that fact: "Merely to have survived is not an index of excellence, // Nor given the way things go, // Even of low cunning." The only recourse is to remind the speaker and us of Psalm 27:35 which is followed by the exquisite transcending despair of "And the good as if they had never been; // Their voices are blown away on the winter wind." The Day of Atonement is the holiest day in the Jewish religious calendar. This is the day when Jews try to amend their behaviour and seek forgiveness for wrongs done against God and others. The evening and day of Yom Kippur are set aside for public or private petitions and confessions of guilt. At the end of Yom Kippur, one hopes

that they have been forgiven by God. The next stanzas capture a struggle between hope and crushing despair that is beyond human comprehension:

Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us
 A very small remnant,
 We should have been as Sodom,
 We should have been like unto Gomorrah.
 And to what purpose, as the darkness closes about
 And the child screams in the jellied fire,
 Had best be our present concern,
 Here in this wilderness of comfort
 In which we dwell.

Shall we now consider
 The suspicious postures of our virtue,

The deformed consequences of our love,
 The painful issues of our mildest acts?
 Shall we ask,
 Where is there one
 Mad, poor and betrayed enough to find
 Forgiveness for us, saying,
 "None does offend
 None, I say,
 None"?

Listen, listen.
 But the voices are blown away.

And yet, this light,
 The work of thy fingers,...

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 45-46)

Contradictions abound, and formal poetic structure is abandoned. Any remnant of hope left is only a "wilderness of comfort" where "Deformed consequences" are countered by "love" and "Painful issues" stem from "mildest acts". The children's cries in "jellied fire" remind us of the firebombing of Dresden, an atrocity perpetrated by the Allies. The poem also contains a contemporaneous reference to the napalm used in Vietnam. Intercession is sought not

from the virtuous but as in *King Lear*, where the desire to punish and personal guilt are fused together (Shakespeare *King Lear* 4.6.168).

The plaintive “None?” trails into silence, to be answered not by a voice, but by the determination of the speaker to keep listening. Voices are blown away but “And yet, this light, // The work of thy fingers” means at the very least that there is no resolution. In this poem light still flickers, unlike its absence in the “Polish eyes”. The balance and competing propositions must be, if not comprehended, then by some means held together.

The final section is more explicit about who is to intercede and why they must do so. Intercession will not come because of the evil wrought on the innocent but is, rather, based on God himself: “O deal with us according to thy name. // We come before thee relying on thy name”. “Thy name” is repeated as an incantation at the end of five lines. This is the ultimate defiance and challenge: save yourself by saving us.

These four elegaic stanzas, as Sacks observes, are modified “repetitions of Herbert stanzas, complete with mended rhymes” (Sacks “Anthony Hecht’s ‘Rites and Ceremonies’: Reading ‘The Hard Hours’” 88). But the debt to George Herbert is perhaps greater than the form. The second stanza of his poem ‘Bitter Sweet’ reads:

I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve;
And all my sour-sweet days
I will lament and love.

(Herbert *English Poems* 161)

Herbert’s words give permission to find beauty and even art in the tension rather than the resolution of living. After the extraordinary confrontations of the previous sections, Hecht also seems to reconcile, in calm contemplation, an acceptance that evil is part of human life:

It is winter as I write.
 For miles the human treasures of snow
 Sag the still world with white,
 And all the soft shapes are washed from top to toe
 In pigeon-colored light.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 46)

Writing is associated through the rhyming pattern of the first stanza with “white” and “light”. There is a resignation to the way things are and a cleansing of sorts through snowfall washing the landscape.

The following stanza speaks of this acceptance:

Who shall profess to understand
 The diligence and purpose of the rose?
 Yet deep as to some gland,
 A promised odor, even among these snows,
 Steals in like contraband.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 47)

The divisions in the vision from “A Hill” are also replicated here in the unnatural presence of the rose’s smell in the midst of winter. The final stanzas are confident, and the whole quartet closes in belief in a salvation to come and an acceptance of fate:

Neither shall the flame
 Kindle upon them, nor the fire burn
 A hair of them, for they
 Shall be thy care when it shall come to pass,
 And calling on thy name
 In the hot kilns and ovens, they shall turn
 To see as it is prophesied, and say,
“He shall come down like rain upon mown grass.”

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 47)

The final line from psalm 72:6 speaks of God the regenerator of life, even to “mown grass”. Sacks describes this final section, with “its obsessive yet almost soothingly hypnotic repetitions”, as throwing “itself against the entire fabric of doubt that has been woven throughout the poem”, and claims that the “entire poem’s argument and development has

been conducted at the level of form alone” (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 87).

Certainly we can see Sacks’ point that “the responsive and creative willingness to balance the image of universal forgiveness against that of universal sin”, where the “guilt of the witness and survivor has now received its fullest acknowledgement and possible forgiveness, and a restored community has shared its dispensation”, is shared with the narrator. Furthermore, in doing so, it supports “the poem’s final rite which...is one of prayer” (Sacks "Anthony Hecht's 'Rites and Ceremonies': Reading 'The Hard Hours'" 88).

But we might also add that the metatext of the quartet is that of a prayer confronting divine silence in the face of evil and its consequences, not just seeking forgiveness. The poem is a deep and harrowing conversation with evil without a “safety net”, where the absence of God reveals the divine strength in prayer itself. It is a dramatic acting out, in the rubric of prayer, of a dialogue with history, imaginatively bearing witness from within the gas chamber itself and echoing Balthasar’s theo-drama. Despair is juxtaposed to hope.

I now want to consider another poem from this collection: “It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It” (Hecht *Hard Hours* 67). This poem begins with the fantasy world where good always triumphs over evil: “The warty giant and witch//Get sealed in doorless jails//And the match girl strikes it rich”. Here is a child’s innocence as to the way the world works and, to some extent, the way we like it to work ourselves. This is many years after Hecht’s horrific wartime experiences and the distance shows even as the nightmare emerges after a drink:

All frequencies are loud
With signals of despair;
In flash and morse they crowd
The roundure of the air.
For the wicked have grown strong,
Their numbers mock at death,
Their cow brings forth their young,
Their bull engendereth.

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 67)

These are light and slightly humorous arm's length observations where horror has been transformed into cinematic plots. Its sing-song, rhymed four-line stanzas in iambic trimeters, are reminiscent of Auden's nursery-rhyme voices in "Miss Gee" and disguise a real fear that the children are not safe (Auden 158-61). Satan "even finds out Job" and the agony of divine abandonment and despair resurfaces not as present fact but as memory:

Yet by quite other laws
My children make their case;
Half God, half Santa Claus,
But with my voice and face,

A hero comes to save
The poorman, beggarman, thief,
And make the world behave
And put an end to grief.

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

(Hecht *Hard Hours* 67-68)

What are these "other laws"? Theodicy declares the laws of God to be different from those of man. These children, though, have permission to summon the saviour and end grief. The murder of the innocents by Herod concludes the poem but is balanced with the knowledge that these children sleep soundly and without care.

Humour distances the recollection but vulnerability and the violence, part of being alive, are always lurking. The poem stands as a comment on survival and the curative capacity of memory. The heat and the agony of evil's consequences are absent, but the imagined reality of its existence remains.

This is the last poem in a collection that opened with the dual vision of "A Hill". Here the confronting conflicts, part of being alive, remain but are in balance, made so through the wishes of children and recollection of potential violence. The poem has a dual prayer at its

ending, the children's and the speaker's, one confident in its intercessionary power, the other dreading the possible failure to intervene. Sinclair says that "[a]s pessimistic as the last poem might be, the prayer in its final lines evokes survival. His children embody the innocence with which perhaps they say their own prayers with unadulterated belief" (Sinclair 14). In turn, the father, by affirming his own hopelessness, can remain open to possibility. It is then that this final stanza "reflects the struggle for self-transcendence coursing throughout the collection that can only be achieved by engaging a discourse that speaks beyond itself" (Sinclair 14). In this poem, at the very least, there is an ongoing passion for achieving the apparently impossible: a connection to the Hebraic concept of God as surpassing all comprehension.

For Hecht, theodicy's deeply disturbing contradictions extend beyond the Holocaust and are at the heart of poems in Hecht's last collection. Its title, *The Darkness and the Light*, refers to Psalm 123:12, "the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light *are* both alike *to thee*." This is a hymn of supplication to God to raise up and forgive the sinner, as it is the sinner who takes up arms against God's enemies and so should be rewarded. God then must see our "dark" and "light" as the same and is urged not to discriminate, not to bifurcate human nature. We are essentially made of an inseparable intermingling of good and evil, and God must accept us as we are. We implore God to ignore the natural law and justice that would condemn evil. This raises the question, are we also to acquiesce when it is God who asks for something incomprehensible that disrupts our understanding of natural justice?

This emphasis brings into play a more complex meditation on Hecht's lifelong poetic preoccupation with the inexplicable, the cruel and the irrational in life. The Psalm also suggests that in God there is no differentiation between dark and light: they are the same.

Here we have a reworking and reinvention of Hecht's contemplations on theodicy. Experience and time make for additional insights and add further to Hecht's sustained preoccupation with divine will, human freedom and the impossible choices it throws up when there is a chasm between them.

With these impossible choices in mind, “Sacrifice”, from this collection, interrogates the story of Abraham and Isaac that reflects Kierkegaard’s meditation on the same story in *Fear and Trembling* as well as a dramatic, modern reimagining of a similar story set in World War Two (Hecht *Darkness* 33-38; Kierkegaard *Fear* 104). Here we see the contemplation of choice involving infanticide demanded by God, and beyond that, when such choices are taken on even without divine command. The triptych of poems brings into play the intimate relationship between thinking, conception and expression spoken of by Hecht in his work on Auden. This is a sustained three-part deliberation framed, not only by the formality or otherwise of its individual sections, but also through the exploration of the Kierkegaardian teleological leap of faith and the consequences when no such comfort is available (Kierkegaard *Fear* 36).

The poem’s sections are entitled “Abraham”, “Isaac” and “1945”. They invite readers to see a narrative from one panel to the next. Each poem is bound by one meditation on the nature of justice from three perspectives: the divine, the human, and, most disturbingly, the inexplicable and irrational actions that appear in the absence of divine meaning. These perspectives are depicted through a retelling of the sacrifice of Isaac, commanded by the God of Abraham, or determined by the head of a farming family caught up in the retreat of the German army from Normandy in 1945. It is tempting to note the triune nature of this poem given Balthasar’s invocation of the internal turmoil within the blessed trinity as the father “wills” the son to death on the cross and his subsequent descent into hell. The triptych form also provides Hecht with the basis to write a narrative on the difference and negation of human by divine justice across time and history. In particular, in the last of these panels, Hecht reclaims a dramatic and narrative form for poetry as the German retreat from Normandy unfolds.

The first section, “Abraham”, is four stanzas in length, each with psalm-like strophic cadences:

Long years, and I found favor
 In the sight of the Lord, who brought me out of Ur
 To where his promise lay,
 There with him to confer
 On justice and mercy and the appointed day
 Of Sodom's ashen fate;
 For me he closeted sweetness in the date,
 And gave to salt its savor.

Three promises he gave,
 Came like three kings or angels to my door:
 His purposes concealed
 In coiled and kernel store
 He planted as a seedling that would yield
 In my enfeebled years
 A miracle that would command my tears
 With piercings of the grave.

(Hecht *Darkness* 33)

This section also reflects a *todah* or psalm singing of trust in God; a trust that must be blind and based on an unknowing of the divine. The rhetoric is majestic and a formal "progress". Here, poetic formality is the leap of faith and syntactical bridge of understanding between Abraham and the Lord. Such psalmic forms are beyond individual invention or voice and speak of the Jewish race's means to comprehend the Godhead. Abraham sees himself as on an equal footing with "The Lord", or at least as having been raised up to be so. The creator and the created are in harmony about "Justice and Mercy". There is reference to Abraham's involvement with the decision to destroy Sodom, in which he suggests to God that the city should be saved, an irony in the light of what is to unfold (Genesis 18:16-33, The New King James Version). Abraham's hubris lies in the assumption that reason is the common measure between divine and human justice. God gives life and meaning, and man is part of this giving as much as the receiving. But the separateness of man and God is maintained in the structure of the stanza, with God being referred to in longer lines while matters referring to Abraham are described in shorter ones. This textual delineation foregrounds the soon to be revealed difference between the measure of God's justice and Abraham's.

The second stanza continues with the same line pattern, the divine intervention or presence being interspersed with human acknowledgement and events. The “Three promises” given to Abraham reflect the three persons in one God. The miraculous birth of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is foretold in the miraculous birth of Isaac, an event that “would command my tears/with piercings of the grave.” This stanza has echoes of both mortality, God’s power to give and take away but, more ominously, it prefigures the concealed purpose in the unknowable consequences of Isaac’s “miracle” birth. His sacrifice and death, to which Abraham will agree without understanding, is carried out to obey the commands of divine justice.

The third stanza breaks the pattern of dialogue, with God’s voice dominating:

“Old man, behold Creation,”
Said the Lord, “the leaping hills, the thousand-starred
Heavens and watery floor.
Is anything too hard
For the Lord, who shut all seas within their doors?”
And then, for his name’s sake
He led me, knowing where my heart would break,
Into temptation.

(Hecht *Darkness* 33)

“Creation” is rhymed with “temptation”. They go hand in hand. They are the “beginning” and the “end” of the stanza, declaring that temptation is part of God’s creation, all one and the same, echoing the collection’s title. We are dealing with a justice which is not human. Alienating arrogance saturates the first line. The drive of the lines remains measured but is authoritarian, as this is the Lord’s voice speaking to his created. It recalls Gloucester’s line: “as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport” (Shakespeare “King Lear” 9.1.37-38). The dialogue has been swept aside and God’s declaration, “Is anything too hard”, speaks of the unfettered power that separates humanity from divinity. This declaration also, in a curious way, asks us to leap ahead and anticipate divine intervention. Contradiction lies at the heart of this power. Nothing is logical. The last stanza holds in stasis the moment of irrational infanticide where salvation descends and alters fact, place and time:

The whole of my long life
 Pivoted on one terrible day at dawn.
 Isaac, my son, and I
 Were to Moriah gone.
 There followed an hour in which I wished to die,
 Being visited by these things:
 My name called out, the beat of gigantic wings,
 Faggots, and flame and knife.

(Hecht *Darkness* 34)

Again the rhyme of the first line with the last - "life"/"knife" - binds the meditation together. Life and death are all the same to the divine. The distancing of the narrative in "Isaac, my son and I// Were to Moriah gone", is followed by the urgent pressure of the pentameter in "There followed an hour in which I wished to die,". The double stress on "these things" highlights the contemporaneous unsequenced nature of events. The final lines, "My name called out, the beat of gigantic wings / Faggots, and flame, and knife", compress further death and divine intervention.

While "Abraham" speaks about the dissonance of divine and human justice and our incomprehension of the former, the second poem, "Isaac", is a deeply personal recounting of the story from the victim's perspective. This poem speaks of the triple-bounded silence of Abraham to his son, his wife and God who is absent at the point of commitment to sacrifice:

Youthful I was and trusting and strong of limb,
 The fresh-split firewood roped tight to my back,
 I bore unknowing that morning my funeral pyre.
 My father, face averted, carried the flame,
 And in its scabbard, the ritual blade he bore.
 It seemed to me at the time a wearisome trek.

I thought of my mother, how, in her age, the Lord
 Had blessed her among women, giving her me
 As joke and token both, unlikelihood
 Being his way. But where, where from our herd
 Was the sacrifice, I asked my father. He,
 In a spasm of agony, bound me hand and foot.

(Hecht *Darkness* 35)

Isaac's eyewitness account encompasses all the ignorance of his position. If the previous poem spoke of the possible bridge that is broken between the divine and the human, this is an intimate account of victimhood and the physical texture of sudden, unexpected fear. The poem begins with a sketch of the body language, "strong of limb", "Fresh-split firewood roped tight to my back", his father's "face averted" and a "wearisome trek"- all physical aspects of the journey. This body language, variance in meter, and use of verbs in the past tense are akin to an external or reported first-hand account. But the stanza is also a stark depiction of the silences surrounding the journey. Isaac's trust is based on a fundamental unknowing which the averted face of his father further enforces. Abraham is caught in a jailed-in silence because his obedience to divine command breaks all common sense over and above the human bonds between father, son and wife.

The second stanza speaks of the son's thoughts as events are about to unfold and the unease that no "sacrifice" could be identified. Isaac acknowledges the unnaturalness of his birth. The irony of the divine gift of his birth "Giving her to me/As a joke and token both, unlikelihood/being his way" (Hecht *Darkness* 34) describes God as a cruel jester as much as a fulfiller of promise to the faithful Abraham and Sarah. His way is not the way of man and so is incomprehensible. The stanza concludes suddenly in the realisation of impending death when the question of what is to be sacrificed is answered, and the fear and trembling in the act for both father and son is revealed.

Emotion and terror are patent in the following stanza:

I thought, *I am poured out like water, like wax*
My heart is melted in the midst of my bowels.
 Both were tear-blinded. Hate and love and fear
 Wrestled to ruin us, savage us beyond cure.
 And the fine blade gleamed with the fury of live coals
 Where we had reared an altar among the rocks.

(Hecht *Darkness* 35)

Hecht's interpolation of Psalm 22:14, with one small transposition to fit within the metric structure, is the centrepiece around which the poem revolves. This is a powerful and dramatic image of physical fear at the realised moment of execution. In this moment diametrically opposed images and emotions summon the anguish of the first poem but now from Isaac's perspective. This deeply offensive act of filicide, couched as a sacrificial purpose, is also present in the use of a "ritual" blade on an "altar". The final stanza is a song of joy and relief ("peace"), not so much for the Lord as for the father and son who were "sentenced and reprieved by the same voice", and for all their descendants who will be "numbered even as the stars", saved at "such a small price" of the ram, the symbol of the son of God:

Peace be to us both, to father Abraham,
To me, elected the shorn stunned lamb of God –
We were sentenced and reprieved by the same Voice –
And to all our seed, by this terror sanctified,
To be numbered even as the stars at the small price
Of an old scapegoated and thicket baffled ram.

(Hecht *Darkness* 35)

The question left unanswered is whether the ram is the same as Isaac. Are the human and the animal equivalent sacrifices to God? It is the inconceivable and unknowable nature of terror in the moment portrayed that has the power to sanctify the future offspring of the chosen race. These poems complete the circle from both a divine and human perspective where there is, as Kierkegaard might put it, the capacity to make a leap of faith. The poems are a sustained meditation on a biblical incident that, in itself, has intertextual references to Jesus' agony and sacrifice in the New Testament.

In their depiction of silence between father and son, the poems remind us of the approach used by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous poet-theologian, Johannes de Silentio, when discussing the story of Abraham and Isaac. Hecht takes on a similar role and combines textual grafts from the Old Testament. His active engagement with the text is evident as rewriter, writer and thinker, and he resolves the matter in much the same way as Kierkegaard does with a "leap of faith". Belief matters and brings some sense of purpose.

But these certainties for Hecht are tested in the final poem “1945”, which is a palimpsest on the previous sections and their understanding of sacrifice:

It was widely known that the army of occupation
 Was in full retreat. The small provincial roads
 Rumbled now every night with tanks and trucks,
 Echoed with cries in German, much *mach schnell*,
Zurück, ganz richtig, augenblicklich, jawohl,
 Audible in the Normandy countryside.
 So it had been for days, or rather, nights,
 The troops at first making their moves in darkness,
 But pressures of haste toward the end of March
 Left stragglers to make their single ways alone,
 At their own risk, and even in daylight hours.

(Hecht *Darkness* 36)

Third person reporting, or a news camera view of events, differentiates this poem from the first two. There is no silence here, as tanks and trucks rumble down roads with the audible cries of retreating soldiers. The first stanza places the narrative *in medias res* as the German army’s retreat disintegrates from the orderly to the chaotic. This is a time of fear for soldiers and civilians. No time for thinking, just the instinctual flight from capture. Hecht has commented on poetry’s abdication to novels of its capacity to tell a story. In “1945”, the loose blank verse structure is relaxed and free flowing and in tune with modern storytelling. It eschews personal and internal reflection for a matter-of-fact, plain and external perspective in the retelling of events that speak for themselves:

Since the soldiers were commandeering anything
 They needed – food, drink, vehicles of all sorts –
 One rural family dismantled their bicycle,
 Daubed the chrome parts – rims, sprocket, spokes – with
 mud,
 And wired them carefully to the upper boughs
 Of the orchard. And the inevitable came
 In the shape of a young soldier, weighed down
 With pack and bedroll, rifle, entrenching tools,
 Steel helmet and heavy boots just after dawn.

(Hecht *Darkness* 36)

The family have made a secret of their bicycle. They have broken it apart and covered it in mud. But the poem's other protagonist, in this case a scared German soldier not a divine presence, has the power of life and death and arrives to ask for a possible means of escape. The intertextual echoes from the other panels of the triptych are present: what is divinely inexplicable and unable to be communicated becomes the gestures of the farmer and the foreign language of the soldier:

They couldn't understand but gesture and rifle
 Made his imperious wishes perfectly clear.
 They stood in a huddled group, all nine of them.
 And then he barked his furious command.

(Hecht *Darkness* 36-37)

The incommunicable is rendered absurd by the father's refusal even to understand the soldier when he does speak French. This pantomime of denial is more powerful than language. It signals the potential martyrdom of the family based on the absurd notion that refusal to provide transport to one soldier will, in any way, alter the course of the war. This situation is doubly absurd, and the soldier recognizes it as such, given the farm's isolation. They must have a bike.

The farmer's action defies all logic or human instinct in the same way that Abraham's obedience to God's does following his command to sacrifice Isaac. This is a world without

belief. There can be no leap of faith with subsequent salvation, and this sin is a sacrifice without redemption:

And with the blunt nose of his rifle barrel
 Judiciously singled out the eldest son,
 A boy perhaps fourteen, but big for his years,
 Obliging him to place himself alone
 Against the whitewashed front wall of the house.
 Then, at the infallible distance of ten feet,
 With rifle pointed right at the boy's chest,
 The soldier shouted what was certainly meant
 To be his terminal order: *BICYCLETTE!*

(Hecht *Darkness* 37-38)

So when we read that the soldier's gun was aimed at an "infallible distance" or that he roared "BICYCLETTE!" as a "terminal" order, absolute god-like commands, the ruthless power and the illogical sacrifice by this father of his son becomes a rewriting of the biblical story. But the power of the text rests not just in the rewriting but in an unfolding drama without any leap of faith. It has added resonance because of Hecht's wartime experience, drenched as it is in personal recollection, history and fact. This poem's story is brought to light in such careful detail. Hecht is writing this story as well as rewriting the theological contemplation and its implications negatively: without a divine presence.

The poem culminates in a cinematic cross-cut with time shifts, close-ups and camera angles. At the climactic decision point, there is a pause before the gunshot as the camera pans across the fields and finishes with a close up of the soldier's trigger finger:

It was still early on a chilly morning.
 The water in the tire-treads of the road
 Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,
 Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves.
 The very grass was a lead-crystal gray,
 Though splendidly prismatic where the sun
 Made its slow way between the lingering shadows
 Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.
 There was leisure enough to take full note of this
 In the most minute detail as the soldier held
 Steady his index finger on the trigger.

(Hecht *Darkness* 38)

This pause is a silent vision of “heart stopping” unfathomable dread. The images deployed are tied to the light, not to the sound of the previous stanzas. This is a revelation or a seeing of imminent death heightened by silence. Stillness, coupled with vision, sits in such words as “polished”, “frost”, “lead -crystal gray” and “prismatic”. Light holds the gaze like a film location’s lighting as the camera’s lens travels across the farm. Light is the focusing medium capturing the cold and stillness of the held thought. Actions and consequences are beyond reason. Why would the family not own up to having a bike? The story itself struggles for answers: “It wasn’t charity. Perhaps mere prudence/ Saving a valuable round of ammunition/ for some more urgent crisis...” The decision is “wordless” and unexplained. The lacuna in the action and extension of the moment through a heightened sense of the time of day, replace the confusion of conflicting emotions at the moment of terror. The soldier’s decision to spare the son’s life is just as irrational as the angel’s message of redemption which it replaces.

The traumatic event’s subsequent impact on the family is described in the final stanza:

There followed a long silence, a long silence.
 For years they lived together in that house,
 Through daily tasks, through all the family meals,
 In agonized unviolated silence.

(Hecht *Darkness* 38)

There is no “praise” or “peace”, as in the previous poems, just a dramatic silence. Because the decision is without explanation, the family is denied the cathartic release of language in the future. The quotidian activities of family life are without articulated, meaningful purpose. The silence is not that of Abraham, who was trapped in silence before the sacrifice; this silence grips all the family after the son’s possible murder and is unremitting. It is both “agonised” and unspeakable. Nor is there any hope of relief. Can the sacrifice of Isaac be comprehended only because of the presence of an unknowable God and through the leap of faith?

The title of the sequence speaks of sacrifice. We are asked to consider three perspectives on this that are beyond the normal understanding of sacrifice. The laying down of a life is often seen as a life-affirming event: “Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). But in the case of “Abraham” and “Isaac”, it is seen as one of deep destruction and harm saved through no human reprieve but by an intervention that cannot be relied upon. In the case of “1945”, the sacrifice is bleakly nihilistic. The comparison to both the Gospel of St John and the previous poems is unavoidable. Hecht provides the paratextual framework for us to reflect on the alternatives and he asks: where is the sense? Hecht invites the reader to consider that the Hidden Law may be incomprehensible, but that without it there is just silence. Silence runs through all three poems. There is the silence of the divine, divorced from the human, which overwhelms any attempt for human action to transcend or comprehend it. There is the silence forced on Abraham as he proceeds to obey God’s command to kill his son; and there is the silence without meaning where the entire farming family collaborates to deny, in silence, the existence of the bicycle. “Sacrifice” runs from the ceremonial cadences of the Old Testament to the tense immediacy of dramatic reporting as events unfold in World War II.

In *The Hidden Law*, Hecht observed how life and time altered Auden’s poetic approach, and that his own attitudes also changed: “I suspect I may have changed my views and more decisively than he” (Hecht *Hidden Law* ix). Certainly in “1945”, we see an example of Hecht decisively relaxing the formality of many of his earlier poems. But he also adds: “what remained a constant is the endorsement of Valéry’s declaration: “I like those lovers of poetry who venerate the goddess with too much lucidity to dedicate to her the slackness of

their thought and the relaxation of their reason”” (Hecht *Hidden Law* ix). Hecht is constant in his belief that poetry demands active and engaged thinking. The engagement is seen in the re-writing of Kierkegaard’s theological meditation on Abraham and Isaac, in the use of the formalities of psalm-like verse, and in the thinking of the theological consequences of a divine presence, its absence, and Hecht’s own recollection of war.

Acts of drama, imaginatively told, are at the heart of Hecht’s work here. At its best, his is a critical intelligence that incorporates emotional resonances as part of the writing. As with “Rites and Ceremonies”, “Sacrifice” is a sustained exercise employing creative theological platforms to explore the fraught issues of theodicy. These poems are framed with care. To describe them as the poetry of critical intelligence born of New Criticism is inaccurate. Such a categorization does not take into account the longer poetic inheritance and the deep theological framework upon which these texts are laid out.

Sinclair maintains that Hecht does not use form to play ironically against content at all. Rather the capacity to maintain the rubric of prayer as conversation, in the face of moral evil, and to consider it within memory and context, means that something more is going on than a merely ironic vision. He goes further and explains Hecht’s intertwining of prayer and theodicy by enlisting a Derridean approach, accepting the hopelessness of prayer as an end point but rather seeing praying as making it possible “to encompass everything”. Sinclair quotes Derrida as saying: “Hopelessness is part of what prayer should be”, and proposes that “Hecht, like Derrida, prays to an impossible God for whom he has no expectations while wandering the groundlessness of the desert”; “the very hopelessness of prayer makes poetry capable of offering trauma”, such as the Holocaust, “meaning” (Sinclair 5). Prayer is a dramatic rubric.

A similar point is made by John Caputo in describing Derrida’s *Circumfession*:

Prayer is addressed to the other, supplicates the other, and asks the other.
For what? For what does one pray? One prays for nothing, nothing
determinate. For nothing other than that the other hear it, for nothing other
than to keep on praying. I pray the other. I pray to the other. I pray for the

other. I pray that the other hear it and receive it and that the other may come, that the relation to the other be sustained, kept open.

To pray is not to utter a proposition which is true or false, but to confess, and confession is without truth; to pray is to invoke, to call to do (*facere*) something. He is praying, before God, for the coming of the other, vowing to remain faithful to the promise, to let the other come, swearing before God, *respondeo*, I promise, believe me, I am telling the truth, beyond proof and perception, to let the other come.....in prayers and tears.

A prayer is not a constative but a performative, not a propositional truth but rather the truth one makes or does, living truly, that is staying open and owning up to the coming of the other. To pray is to ask for nothing but to keep on praying and that the other hear the prayer. Help me to address you. "Lord I do believe. Help thou my unbelief." That is an almost perfect prayer because it is a prayer for help to keep on praying,.. O Lord help me to stay open because I am closing down fast. (Caputo *Prayers* 296)

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida also considers the implications of the story of Abraham and Isaac, as retold in *Fear and Trembling*. Derrida contextualises the story as one in which we tremble before the gift of

infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me and myself who doesn't see what is looking at me; it is the gift and endurance of death that exists in the irreplaceable, the disproportion between the infinite gift and my finitude, responsibility as culpability, sin, salvation, repentance and sacrifice. (Derrida 55-56).

Abraham is asked to work towards salvation in the absence of God "without either seeing or knowing, without hearing the law or the reasons for the law" (Derrida 57).

As a consequence, we neither know from whence the salvation comes, nor how it will be realised. This means that we are forced into absolute solitude: "No one can speak with us and no one can speak for us" (Derrida 57). In this instance, Abraham cannot speak about his

order to kill his son as it is an order to obey in absentia. As Derrida says, “God himself is absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret at the moment he has to be obeyed” (Derrida 57). This God demands of Abraham an “untenable gesture: to offer his son Isaac as sacrifice”, and sacrifice is unique, irreplaceable and without substitution (Derrida 58). Abraham’s silence, keeping the secret from his family and his son because of the demands of God, transgresses and shatters what might be considered the natural ethical order. Derrida maintains that “God would not have asked Abraham to put Isaac to death that is, to make a gift of death as a sacrificial offering to himself, to God, unless Abraham had an absolute, unique, and incommensurable love for his son”, and he concludes that the episode “can be read as a narrative development of the paradox constituting the concept of duty and absolute responsibility” (Derrida 66).

That Derrida and Hecht would have little in common in their approach to poetry is well attested.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, from a theological perspective, there are some common threads. Both men are dealing with matters relating to theodicy. More importantly, they consider the question: what if there is no answer? Hecht does not offer any easy hope that prayer can bring meaning to the atrocities of genocide. Caputo and Derrida suggest that the very mechanism in Hecht’s poems of praying as the rubric and means to confront evil is important. This prayer is the acting out that is central, not the outcome. The prayer reflects as well the power of the theo-dramatics enlisted by Balthasar in grappling with theodicy. We are witnessing an even more interesting proposition than that proposed by the contributors to *The Burdens of Formality*. Hecht, in these poems, has embarked on a conversation with evil and an inquiry into the nature of theodicy, attempting to comprehend their meaning through the continuous dramatic balancing of prayer, memory and witness.

These poems are rightly seen, by the contributors to *The Burdens of Formality*, as a touchstone of Hecht’s best work. They are poems that attempt to provide us purpose through a poetic and theological confrontation with evil. But, as mentioned, at the beginning of this chapter, Hecht’s work should not be “shoehorned” into one theme or preoccupation. Hecht’s engagement with what it is for us to be alive requires a more diverse

⁵⁸ See *Obbligati* (272)

canvas. In the following chapter, I will consider a collection of poems that make further inquiries about human failure through the creation of other characters and their experiences.

Chapter Four

Explorations in Dramatic Character

The previous chapter considered Hecht's poems that spoke of our incomprehension when confronted with moral evil. I argued that Hecht's poems, while rightly admired for their sophistication, elegance and range of cultural reference, are balanced with significant meditations on issues that confront us all, individually and collectively. In this chapter, I consider Hecht's poems that create distinct, imagined dramatic characters marrying personal reflection with portraits of human failure and disappointment. Hecht realises these characters in various guises: psychological portrayals, stories told, played out over time, and through a recreation of the character "Death", reminiscent of the medieval "Danse Macabre".⁵⁹ I will argue that, in doing so, he again enhances the palette of his poetic repertoire for exploring aspects of human failure. As in the previous chapter, comprehending this failure adds further light to our understanding of the human condition. Again, I will base my argument on what emerges from a close reading of the poems themselves.

Just after the publication of *Flight Among the Tombs*, the journal *Bomb* asked Hecht to comment on his assertion that imaginative writing was now left entirely to writers of prose, poetry being predominantly "confessional". In response, he urged poets to create distinct dramatic characters in their work:

What I was saying was intended slightly ironically, because it's not that poets think of themselves as privileged or narcissistic, but in fact, the public and the critics have come to expect this of them. There is the whole Whitman tradition, and Allan Ginsberg is part of it, and a few others are too....The truth is that novelists are never blamed, or very rarely blamed, for not being able to create a bunch of characters who are different from themselves. Too often it's supposed that poets can't do this, that their imagination is limited in some way, or that they are too self-obsessed. I

⁵⁹ This is a medieval allegory that depicts death as the great leveller no matter one's station in life. The "Dance of Death" unites all mankind.

think that this is something that poetry has to break away from. It has to embrace much wider fields of imagination than it would if it were concerned with the psychic life of the poet. (Hecht, Anderson and Stephens 30)

Later in the same interview, he commented that a broader use of one's imagination was capable of creating characters beyond oneself, with their own capacity to drive a dramatic narrative. Coupled with this was his desire for an acute observation of things and life captured in the moment:

I think what I have been trying to do is juggle two things that are not necessarily connected. One of them is my conviction that a poem is a mini drama, or a potential drama, something that has dramatic elements in it. The poetry I like has been poetry that has that dramatic character. At the same time, I have also tried consciously to present as decisively accurate a description as I can of the objects in the world. To do that, at least in my limited way, I take something which is static. Even if it is a creature in motion, I can catch it only in a certain instant. (31)

The same point was raised in his lengthy interview with Philip Hoy, where he refers to Keats' comment that a poet has no personality. Hecht states: "I have in fact tried to disguise myself in my poems, and have adopted voices of persons wholly different from me, including women...Some of the grotesque misreadings of my poems have been made by those who assume that all my poems are voiced *in propria persona*" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 60). He admits, though, that he had not forsworn autobiographical material altogether, conceding that "there must be some part of any writer that goes into the creation of his characters, however alien from himself they may seem" (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 61)). Again, in an interview with Philip Gerber, he speaks about creating characters in poems as part of a story:

At the time I started to write, I felt that modern fiction had greatly usurped the devices of poetry, that one taught a story of James Joyce, or a novel of Flaubert as though it were a lyric poem. And these works had very much the concision, the deftness and the unity of form and language that you expect from a lyric poem. They also had the advantage of narrative; while in a way, lyric poems were dwindling down to nothing but ditties. So when I began, I wanted somehow to repossess some

of the interest in drama that comes from a narrative, with a potential working out of a story and its implications. (Hecht, Gerber and Gemmet 8)

Hecht is here standing up for a particular style of poetics with his comments about the “Whitman tradition” which, if not “confessional”, to use Alvarez’ term, was in Hecht’s view essentially limiting (Alvarez 187).

Caution should be exercised here. I am not sure that there are not, at times, strong personal elements to his poetry nor, as I have demonstrated in a previous chapter, did Hecht declare that there was only one way in which a poem might work. Certainly this chapter will show that in conjunction with those elements, he was able to create distinct characters.

Hecht’s remarks also take issue with the poetry often described as “Beat”, of which Allen Ginsberg is probably the most famous proponent. He challenges poets to create from a more complex palette, not restricting themselves to a type of lyric that sang of a specific or personal emotional moment, but reclaiming for poetry stories about dramatic characters other than themselves. I note his emphasis on the concision, the deftness, the unity of form with language in Joyce and Flaubert, which also suggests that such complexity can be realised within a framework of rhyme and metre. He is not denying the connection between the writer and what is written, but rather expanding the lens through which any poem can be read. For him, stories and narrative mean the same thing. He explicitly wants to restore a concept of narrative or story in poetry by including “wider fields of imagination” and creating “characters” that are not just depictions of the “psychic life of the poet himself” (Hecht, Anderson and Stephens 30). He sees such poems as capable of depicting a “mini drama” (31). He wants to repossess an “interest in drama that comes from a narrative, with a potential working out of a story and its implications”. Importantly, Hecht speaks of “a narrative”, not of narrative in any general or theoretical sense.

Narrative's place within literature has been discussed since Plato and Aristotle. This is an area of considerable theoretical conversation today.⁶⁰ The literary narrative has commonly been defined as "the representation of a real or fictitious event or series of events by language, more specifically written language" (Genette "Boundaries" 1). This definition speaks of events rather than of characters within those events. A description of events is all that is required, rather than direct speech by characters or natural occurrences, for example. But the concept of narrative has, from earliest times, been more complex than that: Homer's *Iliad*, for example, was an interplay between direct speech and description, as when Priam asks for Hector's body from Achilles (Homer 24.559-82) or when Achilles is informed of Patrocles' death (18.24-30, 114-20).

Hecht uses "stories" and "narrative" interchangeably, and I will adopt the same approach in the discussion below, as the focus of this thesis is on the poetry itself. We have already considered the growth of Hecht's style from that of a New Criticism "Childe" to that of a poet with a more complex palette, and here he observes that there have been grotesque misreadings made by those who assume that all his poems are expressions of his own circumstances and life. He admits, however, that a complete independence or separation is not possible. He also says that he wants to capture moments of stasis. This capturing of moments is a signature of much of Hecht's work and is present in the poems considered below. But perhaps there is also more to be said about dramatic character which draws attention to how we might read Hecht's poems. Below is an extract from Lowell's "Ulysses and Circe":

After so many millennia,
 Circe,
 are you tired
 of turning swine into swine?

How can I please you,
 if I am not a man?

⁶⁰ For example, Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997); *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982).

I have grown bleak-boned with survival –
 I who hoped to leave the earth
 younger than I came.

Age is the bilge
 we cannot shake from the mop.

Age walks on our faces –
 at the tunnel's end,
 if faith can be believed,
 our flesh will grow lighter.

(Lowell 717)

This poem gives us a dramatic character who hardly recognises the listener, becoming a series of thoughts and precise images strung together more for the benefit of Ulysses as he grapples with ageing. Circe's island is the physical prison that replicates ageing's blind cycle changing "swine into swine". It can only be broken in death and with faith in God making "our flesh grow lighter".

Stephanie Wortman sums up Lowell's contribution to imagined and dramatic character re-creations in the following terms:

In its most exemplary form, the dramatic monologue indicates both a speaker and an auditor. It responds to a dramatic occasion, encompasses some action, and reveals the quality of the speaker as a character. Often the speaker is differentiated from the writer by name or other details in the poem...For modernist poets, this tendency toward exploration of a singular mind made the dramatic monologue a form in which to examine fragmented consciousness. In doing so, modernists de-emphasised the relation between speaker and the auditor to focus on the individual's faceted personality...Lowell extends the fragmentation in his monologues, further breaking down the distinctions between author, speaker and auditor. (Wortman 89-90)

Does Hecht do something different? Certainly, three interrelated strands emerge. He wants characters distinguishable from a poet's personality, set in stories unfolding over time, or as explanations of a moment, which are dramatic and imaginative. In short, stories, characters, direct speech and drama are all required. I will demonstrate that moments and stories are compatible and can be strung together, in sequences, over time. However, do his character monologues collapse the distinctions "between author, speaker and auditor", and the reader? In this matter, Hecht's poems do not follow Lowell's path completely. They want continued active engagement and judgement from readers, because of their moral dimension and their conversations on aspects of human failure. The reader is invited to engage in the poem's imaginative drama or listen. Drama and imagination are hallmarks of Hecht's poems on theodicy. His approach here is similar: to use dramatic characters and a human-centred engagement to present us with uncomfortable realities. This project incorporates experiences outside the range of the specifically personal as we have seen in "1945".

Hecht's dramatic poems range from the psychological dramas played out in "Green: An Epistle", "The Grapes" or "Ghost in the Martini" to a study of relationship and identity as retold in "The Short End", as well as to the devastating consequences of disengagement and alienation from life in "See Naples and Die". In the same vein, Hecht reworks the medieval personification of Death as an ever-present character and actor in the sequence *Presumptions of Death* (Hecht *Millions* 13, 56; *Vespers* 3, 9; *Transparent* 21; *Flight* 3-49). In each of them, Hecht takes imaginatively conceived characters, setting them within a dramatic story to make particular observations concerning our humanity. They trace, from various perspectives and in a rich array of styles, our attempts to cope with human failure and disappointment in ourselves. I want now to consider some examples to demonstrate the assessment outlined above.

James Panabaker (*Review: Transparent Man*), Lachlan Mackinnon (*A Wordsworthian Gift*), Joseph Brodsky (*Anthony Hecht and the Art of Poetry*), Jan Schreiber (*The Achievements of Anthony Hecht*) and Edward Mendelson (*Seeing is Not Believing*), all wrote reviews of the collections in which these poems appeared. All made particular qualifications about Hecht's success in creating characters that are independent from himself. These criticisms will be

dealt with below in conjunction with my readings of the particular poems. As previously mentioned, Donald Davie damns Hecht's poetics with faint praise as being "Victorian", by which I take him to mean that they are full of style without substance (Davie "Review" 44). These comments were made in a review of *The Venetian Vespers*, a book in which many of Hecht's imagined character poems are published. So how successful has he been in realising his stated ambition in revivifying this type of poetry?

"Green: An Epistle", from *Millions of Strange Shadows*, explores the consequences of compromising and suppressing one's identity to conform to social ideals. The poem is capped by a quotation from Theodore Roethke, which depicts nature as ever regenerative and, despite the worst of circumstances, a bringer of new life (Hecht *Millions* 13). This epistle, however, is an internal dialogue which sees nature take on a more sinister quality. Hecht speaks at length about this poem to Philip Hoy:

Now "Green: An Epistle", is about the disguises of Pride. It is about how attempts to suppress the ego on behalf of some idealism or the desire to appear kind and generous will quietly and all unbeknownst to someone convert that suppression into a corruption of the soul, a deformity of spirit, and the longer the suppression goes on the more martyred and selfless one feels and the more monstrous the deformity. The universal desire to think well of ourselves almost invariably involves the suppression of memory as well...The speaker in my poem "Green", who is admittedly partly me, has succeeded in deceiving himself into believing that his long suffering patience and forbearance, have paid off in the form of a noble and selfless character, and in this he is profoundly mistaken. (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 68)

The writer of the letter emphatically denies that a smug striving for unfounded aspirational ideals or entertaining a belief that we are living them is, in fact, beneficial. Rather, these false ideals are capable of great harm leading to insidious self-deception. The poem takes the psychological drama of Eliot's poems, such as "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock", one step further. In Eliot's poem, there is a critical dissection of Prufrock's character carried out through internal dialogue and observation. In Hecht's poem, the character is the psychosis

itself which grows, mutates and consumes. Pride is personified, and its growth observed as unvarnished truth, tracing corruption of spirit and being:

I write at last of the one forbidden topic
We, by a truce, have never touched upon:
Resentment, malice, hatred so inwrought
With moral inhibitions, so at odds with
The home-movie of yourself as patience, kindness,
And Charlton Heston playing Socrates,
That almost all of us were taken in,
Yourself not least, as to a giant Roxy.

(Hecht *Millions* 13)

The measured metre orders the concerns to be addressed exactly, revealing a palpable self-scorn. Socially sanctioned ideals are shuffled off into a modern Plato's cave: a "giant Roxy" where we are seduced "into that perfect world/Of Justice under God" (13). The movement in language between Latinate English, popular cultural icons and American slang creates a voice that is simultaneously disturbing and familiar, making the forbidden topic immediate. This letter begins by addressing the gap between a saccharine conception of country and the less than satisfactory realities of "subway" and "homework". The letter recalls Eliot's despair in "The Hollow Men": "This is the dead land// This is cactus land" (Eliot *Collected* 77). When self-regard fails to encompass truth, we see an emerging deformity and its symptoms in the patient's psyche. From this broader consideration, the focus of the poem narrows. There will be no capacity to think large, as the writer confines focus to a place that is "safe", where a clear-eyed view of the evolution of self is explicit (14).

The poem's story starts with a child's Christmas gift, a microscope, through which early signs of malignancy can be detected. Its growth is tracked through the evolutionary progress of flora from the smallest "flagellates"⁶¹ to veritable forests of psychological deformity (14). The inexorable growth of the mind's toxin is dramatically captured over time in this evolutionary metaphor of plants.

⁶¹ These are parasites that affect human health.

The language is luxuriant:

Now scud the glassy pool processionaly
 Until one day, misty, uncalendared,
 As mild and unemphatic as a schwa,
 Vascular tissue, conduit filaments
 Learn how to feed the outposts of that small
 Emerald principate. Now there are roots,
 The filmy gills of toadstools, crested fern,
 Quillworts, and foxtail mosses, and at last
 Snapweed, loment, trillium, grass, herb Robert.

(15)

While the story of pride's evil ecology is played out over time, it is also dramatically portrayed in the moment, the language's elegance complementing this progress. "Now" begins both sentences in the above section. The juxtaposition of extended time and moment works to capture pride's insidiousness, its growth and the immediacy of discovery. The lusciousness of language, noun piled on noun, propels the growth and mirrors the observations of evil found in "Japan" (Hecht *Hard Hours* 76-8). As in "Japan", the evolution is not benign: "Think of some inching tendrils worming down//In hope of water, blind and white as death.//Think of the strange mutations life requires" (15). The "now" of observation and discovery is balanced with the speaker's demand to consider the consequences where "sequoia forests of vindictiveness", when decayed, are transformed through coal into "tiny diamonds of pure hate" (16). "Spite" and "revenge" flourish, a whole malicious package is camouflaged under the semiotics of natural beauty, delight and wonder: "Look, Mommy, quick. Look/Daisies!" (16).

Clear-sightedness brings peace. Recognition provides "moments of almost bliss/A sort of recompense," because acknowledging the underbelly of such suppression of self brings personal acceptance (17). A new person is revealed, "A stranger, quite unknown" but someone more in tune with the reality of the life lived without delusion (17). While the poem depicts aeons, the dramatic urgency in its syntax, with tumbling nouns, provides a counterpoint to this loathing and hatred that has grown "vaster than empires and more slow" (Marvell 21). Post speaks of this poem as being a "mythic inquiry into the origins of evil in the form of a *familiar* epistle, with startling shifts in tone and address, written to another, who also turns out to be a version, perhaps an essential version, of himself" (Post A

Thickness of Particulars 94). My inquiry, though, explores the creation of a character or psychological profile, which is the neurosis itself.

“Green: An Epistle” plots, with precise observation and detached insight, the story and destiny of a psyche that, from its very genesis, has seeds of deformity. Salvation is found in facing the truth. Language, here, takes on the sinuousness of plants and a strong case is made for this richness enhancing the poem’s impact. A singular creative imagination is at the back of this sustained botanical metaphor, and such exhortations to the reader as “consider” and “think” reflect the conscious mapping and progress of the malady. This biological metaphor is used not just to describe a steady corruption of mind but to tell a moral tale that is rich in imagination as it unpicks and tracks through the sin of pride’s growth. Pride is a dramatic personality in its own right, growing within and consuming the individual.

Imaginative characters can also be used to create a devastating commentary on an individual’s motives as well as to observe the foibles of others. The result may not be pleasant but is equally effective in delivering hard truths. In tone, Hecht’s “The Ghost in the Martini” is reminiscent of Auden’s “Victor” and “Miss Gee”; which are light, even nursery rhyme-like, in their quatrains (Auden 132, 38). However, as in Auden, the subject matter is far from childlike. Post’s taxonomy of this poem places emphasis on the professional genesis of its subject matter. The “two illegitimate parents” again reinforces Hecht’s admission that to create characters separate from oneself may not be at all times possible. But perhaps there is another reading available as well that focuses on the language employed in the poem, as well as on its structured quatrains. Hecht’s black humour is all too evident as he proceeds to describe and dissect the story of an academic’s behaviour at a conference drinks function:

Over the rim of the glass
Containing a good martini with a twist
I eye her bosom and consider a pass,
Certain we’d not be missed

In the general hubbub.
 Her lips, which I forgot to say, are superb,
 Never stop babbling once (Aye, there's the rub)
 But who would want to curb

Such delicious, artful flattery?
 It seems she adores my work, the distinguished
 grey
 Of my hair. I muse on the salt and battery
 Of the sexual clinch, and say

Something terse and gruff
 About the marked disparity in our ages.
 She looks like twenty-three, though eager enough.
 As for the famous wages

Of sin, she can't have attained
 Even to union scale, though you never can tell.
 Her waist is slender and suggestively chained,
 And things are going well.

(Hecht *Millions* 56)

The speedy assessment of a potential sexual adventure is driven across the stanzas through the running metre. The first and fourth lines in the first stanza are staccato statements of fact, split second in timing, with the second and third lines working through the adumbrated thinking as the assessment is being made. The gaze is detached and clinical. "Bosom", "waist", "lips" and innocence are all assayed with the detachment of a lion tracking its prey. This is a transactional exercise based in lust and the opportunity to strike. Hamlet's indecision, "Aye there's the rub", is hardly contemplated as the anticipation of "salt and battery" is all but overwhelming. We have a portrait of a man intellectually alert and predatory.

The dramatic conversation is an unvarnished commentary on carnal desire, unflinching in its objective view and, while humorous in construction, cold in its analysis. This conversation is utterly detached being, first and foremost, a carefully observed critical description of both motive and action.

That the “martini does its job” seems to be inevitable. The lightness of touch, the humorous and slightly patronising observation of an old man succumbing to the temptations of all-too-willing flesh, continues as the courting ritual is played out. But the poem then takes on a more savage turn with the entrance of an imagined other self, ready to deliver a tough judgement on this carnal pursuit:

A young man’s voice, by the sound,
Coming, it seems, from the twist in the martini.
“You arrogant, elderly leech, you broken-down
Brother of Apeneck Sweeney!

Thought I was buried for good
Under six thick feet of mindless self- regard?
Dance on my grave, would you, you galliard stud,
Silenus in leotard?”

(57)

The direct speech of this young man abruptly interrupts: no quarter is given in the excoriating analysis of the elderly narrator’s lecherous designs. He takes on, in part, the role of the reader commenting on the academic’s immoral behaviour. More importantly, the young man establishes an internal dialogue of conscience and self-loathing. He belittles, condemns and disregards the basis upon which his reputation has been forged, where the so-called self-denial for the sake of one’s craft is described as little more than a cup of “luke-warm spittle”. The ferocity of this self-loathing is akin to that found in “Green: An Epistle”. The agony of writing is equated with Milton’s vision of hell; “darkness visible” and the vocation of a writer equated to the predicament of Shakespeare’s Richard II, as he tries to people his cell in Pontefract castle with his thoughts in compensation for the lack of human beings. From this imposed neurosis only a “modest fame” has emerged. Nevertheless, carnal instinct triumphs over internalised self-doubt and disgust. The speaker hopes that, just as the swan dies after singing once, the ghost’s outburst is indicative of its death, and no more self-loathing will be heard:

Meanwhile, she babbles on
 About men, or whatever, and the juniper juice
 Shuts up at last, having sung, I trust, like a swan.
 Still given to self-abuse!

Better get out of here;
 If he opens his trap again it could get much worse.
 I touch her elbow, and, leaning toward her ear,
 Tell her to find her purse.

(59)

In *The Burdens of Formality*, J. D. McClatchy writes:

It is true as well that he seeks to dramatize both the difficulty and the apprehension by means of style. Sharply contrasting tones of voice – lambent figures and Latinate turns suddenly give way to slang – are used not just to color his poems but to structure them. His poems continually favor such sorts of doubleness – paired perspectives, sentiment cut with cynicism, moral standards undercut by doubt. Some poems depend on abruptly juxtaposed points of view. (McClatchy "Anatomies" 187)

What McClatchy observes through this “doubleness” is Hecht creating through different characters’ voices different perspectives. Such “doubleness” has an acute capacity to dissect imaginatively the duplicity of a character’s actions and thoughts.

Venetian Vespers also contains many poems that create character stories beyond the personal experiences of the writer. The stories told are painful and at the beginning of the collection Mnemosyne, the mother of the nine muses, is invoked to assist in facing these characters’ trauma (Hecht *Vespers* ii). The created characters’ pain in this collection is of minds, souls, dreams, played out dramatically through time, memory and place. Characters’ stories are worked through moments of epiphany, where time is the revealing arc, fixed and immutable. In other moments, personal histories bring revenge and retribution.

Alternatively, the poem can be read as a cruel cinematic narrative of despair, where time weaves back and forth through layered memory. All the poems have a combination of memory and present revelation which achieves, at times, compelling dramatic stories.

Near the end of “The Grapes”, the first poem in this collection, the chambermaid, through whose eyes we observe the sun’s movement across the lake between resort hotels on opposite shores, speaks of a profound personal epiphany brought on by a clear, new understanding of “sidereal time” (Hecht *Vespers* 5). She reflects that “my little life had somehow crested.//There was nothing left for me now, nothing but years” (5).

Late Renaissance philosophers saw this measurement of time as possessing particular dimensions. Henry More spoke about its effects in his *Enthusiasmus Triumphantus*, claiming that “a man has a sidereal body besides his terrestrial, which, is joined to the stars” (45). “Sidereal” encompasses not only a new dimension of time but a new way of seeing and understanding (45-46). Joseph Hall, another sixteenth-century poet and philosopher, describes the sidereal as a state of “blushing astonishment” (Hall 409). This understanding of time appears at the Chambermaid’s soliloquy, and it also informs and guides Hecht’s approach in “The Grapes”, where time is malleable and multi-faceted.

This time, and its association with light, is a metaphor through which other matters can be considered. The chambermaid’s daydream is anything but simple. The apparent simplicity comes from her interest in vulgar women’s magazines. The complexity of the revelation works, however, through the poem’s elegant language and references as well, for it is hard to believe that the chambermaid has the literary finesse to describe the bowl of grapes as “unblemished jade,//Like turbulent ocean water, with misted skins, //Their own pale, smoky sweat, or tiny frost” (5). There are two voices here: a dramatic dialogue between Hecht’s voice and the chambermaid’s. The language is erudite and refined, the structure elegant, commensurate with the depth of the poem’s meditation. The dream which it retells, however, is jejune but universal. As Post says, this language “enriches the poetic texture”, allowing the reader to contextualize the chambermaid’s circumstances for the reader and perhaps most importantly liberating the dramatic action from the limitations of the character (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 192). For my purposes, though, it is the different time dimensions that are of equal importance, knitting the general contemplation offered to us of life’s arc with the personal dreams and the chambermaid’s final disappointment.

The poem begins with solar time establishing the contrast between two hotels. In the afternoon one is bathed in light and the other, in shade:

At five o'clock of a summer afternoon
 We are already shadowed by the mountain
 On whose lower slopes we perch, all of us here
 At the *Hotel de l'Univers et Déjeuner...*
 Where at the *Beau Rivage*, patrons are laved
 In generous tides of gold. At cocktail time
 Their glasses glint like gems, while we're eclipsed.

(Hecht *Vespers* 3)

The afternoon's change in light awakens the chambermaid's desire to be across the lake, longing to be part of the "tides of gold". Time and light are a "double helix" metaphor for the entire poem. "The younger set" prefer the eastern slopes that catch afternoon sunlight where pre-dinner drinks are an opportunity to "check out" other guests through subtle social rituals that might be a prelude to later assignations. Conversely, the older, quieter clientele prefer the western side, with its morning sunshine.

The divide between youth, vigour, age and resignation is clear:

Still, it is strange and sad, at cocktail time,
 To look across the valley from our shade,
 As if from premature death, at all that brilliance
 Across which silently on certain days
 Shadows of clouds slide past in smooth parade,
 While even our daisies and white irises
 Are filled with blues and darkened premonitions.

(Hecht *Vespers* 3)

Time is "arrested" in the western shore's *Hotel de l'Univers et Déjeuner*. Set in aspic, the magazines are "always 1954" (4). These fuel the chambermaid's adolescent "daydreams" where celebrity snapshots are replete with romance, longing and fantasy for a life out of reach: "a world far removed from the rest of us" (4). They are as insubstantial as the print through which they are presented. But there is also a private erotic fantasy that the chambermaid nurtures: she yearns for the embrace of "Marc-Antoine", one of the bellboys

from the *Beau Rivage* (5). She also acknowledges that this is indeed fanciful, unattainable and as insubstantial as the gossamer spray wielded by “Mr Charles”:

To him the future’s limitless and bright,
 Anything’s possible, one has but to wait.
 No doubt it explains his native cheerfulness.
 No doubt he dreams of a young millionairess,
 Beautiful, spoiled and ardent, at his feet.
 Perhaps it will come to pass. Such things have happened.

(4)

A delicate balance and counterpoint between dream and reality rounds out this series of lines. For all practical reasons, her dreams will remain unfulfilled, whereas Marc-Antoine’s dreams may, because of his youth, come to pass. His attributed “perhaps” is verified in the “have happened”. Daydreaming is common to all, and it is a small step from fantasy and daydream to an epiphany of much greater significance. The qualities of sidereal time are now in play as the poem slides easily from the personal to a meditation on the arc of life and of day.

A “deep secret of the universe” is revealed in the “tender light” of the morning. The chambermaid stares into a crystal bowl of grapes glistening in the rising sunlight. Water and grapes shimmer with colour and trace the sun’s movement. These details are replicated in her observation’s intensity, caught in tiny moments of time, with grapes and the chambermaid’s arm bathed in the sun’s rays filtered through the water. Light brings “blushing astonishment” through its movement across the grapes and with it, a clarity and insight to the arc of a life bound to time:

And watching I could almost see the light
 Edge over their simple surfaces,
 And feel the sunlight moving on my skin
 Like a warm glacier. And I seemed to know
 In my blood the meaning of sidereal time
 And know my little life had somehow crested.
 There was nothing left for me now, nothing but years.
 My destiny was cast and Marc-Antoine
 Would not be called to play a part in it.

(Hecht *Vespers* 5)

“Seemed” speaks of knowledge sensed rather than understood. It is all-encompassing, embracing both emotional and cerebral dimensions and a vision of the future, quasi-religious in kind. Future loves are denied, replaced by a life comprising “nothing but years”. There is nothing left but to wait for the end where “Dandled” speaks of motion without purpose:

And I knew at last, with a faint, visceral twitch,
 A flood of weakness that comes to the resigned,
 What it must have felt like in that rubber boat
 In the mid-Pacific, to be the sole survivor
 Of a crash, idly dandled on that blank
 Untroubled waste, and see the light decline,
 Taper and fade in graduated shades

(5)

There is an obvious reference to John F. Kennedy’s “wartime experience” drifting on the destroyed hull of his PT boat (Tregaskis 85). The language cascades from line to line as realisation and despair rush in. We have a contemplation of life’s *dénouement* worked through a balanced, seamless interweaving of images strung around time and light. The poem moves, in its own arc, from the particular and personal to a final acknowledgement that life itself has a beginning, a middle and an end. Each stage is replete with intense, imagined observations of moments and place, personal aspiration and disappointment.

What is striking about “The Grapes” is the patterned balance of images across the poem as it moves from observation to realisation: just as the sun’s movement reveals the time of day and prefigures a life span. Light is not merely a physical phenomenon; it reveals knowledge and insight. The quotidian chambermaid and her magazine-engendered dream give added poignancy to the poem’s sophisticated contemplation of time and death. Her character provides a counterpoint to, and a dialogue with, the poem’s philosophical considerations, and her story is one of a dramatic personal revelation.

Characters in both “Green: An Epistle” and “The Grapes” reveal dramatic characters over certain periods of time. The growth of malevolent power in the former, and the revelation of utter despair in the latter, spring in part from a deep appreciation of time and its effect on our lives. Characters are framed in time, and their tragedy is played out across its canvas. Time acts as an inevitable fate from which there is no escape. Both poems also contain that static moment that Hecht refers to as part of his poetic preoccupation. The two voices in all three poems establish a place for the reader to unpick the stories actively and their messages.

In another narrative poem, “The Short End”, we have a story of despair as a marriage collapses. Here, the drama unfolds over a series of sequenced snapshots in and out of time. Ultimately, though, we witness the gradual unfolding of the moral and psychological collapse of Shirley Carson and, by implication, the amorality at the heart of the American dream. The poem is prefaced by the sixth stanza of Shakespeare’s poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” (2007), which describes the death of ideal love (Hecht *Vespers* 9). These birds, despite apparent dissonance, created a perfect unity which transcended all logic and material fact. The poem despairs that such a love can no longer exist.

To depict such a chronicle of despair in a national context, Hecht employs the story telling techniques of that quintessential American artistic medium, film. Time becomes plastic as “cuts”, “jump cuts”, “cross cuts”, “ellipses”, “fade ins” and “fade outs” are strung together with soundtracks of American popular songs. These devices allow shifts in time, memory and place. The crass aspects of American culture are on full display in the opening section of the poem. We are at the end of a long and emotionally bankrupt marriage where tawdriness has replaced innocence. The wreckage of this relationship is scattered across the room as vulgar pillows. These described objects carry the weight of psychic and emotional despair: “Pillows from Kennebunkport, balsam scented// And stuffed with wood chips...Pillows that fart when sat on, tasselled pillows...creole and redly carnal” (9). This vulgar “far flung empire” is curated by Shirley. Both her taste and the state of her marriage are parodied. She comes across as a low-rent Mellon or Berenson, giants of American art philanthropy. Norman’s hide and seek game for bottles behind these pillows always ends in failure as

“liquid assets” are “tucked away” and are always found. This charade speaks of despair and Norman “quits”, unable to save Shirley from her alcoholism or restore his failed marriage:

These days he came home from the body shop
 He owned and operated, its walls thumb-tacked
 With centrefold bodies from *Playboy*,
 Yielding, expectant, invitational,
 Came home oil-stained and late to find her drunk
 And the house rank with the staleness of dead butts.
 Staleness, that’s what it was, he used to say
 To himself, trying to figure what went wrong,
 Emptying ashtrays of their ghostly wreckage,
 Their powders and cremations of the past.

(*Vespers* 10-11)

While the bleakness may be personal and particular, there is no mistaking that this marriage breakdown, drenched in crass iconography and its detailed sense of place and time, encompasses the American middle-class way of life and aspirations. In this poem, then, Hecht aims to interrogate a perceived condition of American society.

The nickname, “Kit”, the drawl “so whyantcha fix yerself a drink?”, the shift from “fustian” to “Day-Glo”, are all full of black humour, acidic and unrelenting (10). These elements set up an internal dialogue between the characters and the dramatic depiction of failure. A ketchup-stained cushion from the 1939 New York’s world fair, with its motto: “A Century of Progress”, mocks the optimism of a confident country (9). 1939 was the year that World War Two began, when optimism was dashed and a new dawn destroyed. Corrosive observations are measured out in vulgar pillows. A “conversation pit” places us in the late 50s or early 60s, and it is hard not to think that we are witnessing a scene from the TV series *Mad Men* (although *Mad Men* first went to air years after this poem was published). The camera’s eye moves alertly through “unpeopled but bepillowed rooms”, across time, building a collage of dramatic instances that reveal a story of despair. The final lines dissolve so that memories can emerge and we are taken back to the early “untainted months” of married life (11).

This flashback recalls optimism and promise for the future. Shirley is “hopeful” and adored by her husband, who was then referred to by his overly proper Christian name, Norman, a direct intertextual summoning of Betjeman’s “Norman” in “How to Get on in Society” (Hecht *Vespers* 11, 14; Betjeman 203). Middle America, with all its innocence and hope, is summoned by the music of Kern, Romberg and Friml. Tasteful, elegant, but undemanding, the songs are matched to the idea that wellbeing is synonymous with business achievement (Hecht *Vespers* 11). Norman and Shirley join other sales reps in a luxury resort hotel that boasts an “international string ensemble” organised by Norman’s company who had “generously// Invited the men to bring along their wives” (11). We have all the elements of middle-class success for the newlyweds.

The language builds an aspirational advertisement where materialism nurtures spiritual wellbeing, but we are dealing with a fantasy as slight and insubstantial as the first section’s pillows. Shirley rationalises the “dark” Atlantic’s smell, the room which has no view other than the light shaft, as “more exciting”, designed to heighten the exhilaration of being at the sales convention (11). This is a fantasy concocted by Madison Avenue, where life is lived on the surface of things. Shirley is seduced by the appearance of wellbeing: “She recalled the opulent soft wind-chime music,//A mingling of silverware and ice-water” (11-12)

To construct the story Hecht draws, as mentioned above, on the devices of film cutting, slicing, layering and shifting back and forth in time. The imagery is redolent of a Doris Day/Rock Hudson domestic comedy. But the dissonance in this idyllic setting is observed as well: “all that baritone//Brio of masculine snort and self-assertion//It belonged with cigars and bets and locker rooms//It had nothing to do with damask and chandeliers” (12). The second memory brings a tawdry, lewd and vulgar reverse of the first as she recalls the boardwalk that had an array of tasteless bric-à-brac:

And other shops displaying what was called
 “Sophisticated Nightwear For My Lady,”
 With black-lace panties bearing a crimson heart
 At what might be Mons Veneris’ timber-line.

(Hecht *Vespers* 12)

The colours “crimson” and “magenta”, the materials and styles of these undergarments, echo the vulgarity of the pillows in the first section. This may be a “paradise”, part of the American Dream, but it is dubious and fetid.

The third section returns from emotional and sensory memories tinged with fantasy to accurate, detailed recollection. The cringing slide into vulgarity and the insubstantial foundations of the couple’s hopes, hinted at previously, are patent as the Carsons are treated like spotlighted prey at the company convention. They are the target of ribald jokes that seem to be part of an initiation ceremony for any newcomer, particularly newlyweds. Double entendre runs riot with gags about “the missionary position” made with the hackneyed hymn “Rock of Ages” (Hecht *Vespers* 14). Suggestiveness gives way to crude jokes in the alcohol-fuelled gathering where the atmosphere is malevolent:

She knew when the next round of drinks appeared
That she and Norman were mere hostages
Whom nobody would ransom. Billy Jim asked
If either of them knew a folk-song called
“The Old Gism Trail”, and everybody laughed,
Laughed at the plain vulgarity itself
And at the Carsons’ manifest discomfort
And at their pained, inept attempt at laughter.

(Hecht *Vespers* 14)

Norman and Shirley are easy targets for these seasoned conference goers, who behave with all the morals of hyenas circling fresh meat. There is a fundamental betrayal of the ideals and rose-coloured views of middle-class domesticity, and the gathering’s hypocrisy is all-encompassing when it is revealed: “That they were the only married couple present” (15).

The other conference guests’ attack on the Carsons is immoral and confronting, making a mockery of the American Dream. “The Carsons were made to feel laughably foolish, // Timid and prepubescent and repressed,” as their ideals and emotional security are trashed (15).

In these first three sections, the narrative sweeps and moves from the marriage’s present wreckage to the genesis of its comprehensive demise. It is pitiable that such a personal

relationship is undermined so easily. But building ideals and dreams on a promise concocted out of material aspiration makes for inherent instability. Theirs is a house made of straw. These particular attacks from the malicious and world-weary threaten to diminish a happiness based on insubstantial foundations. This poem has become a narrative commenting not only on the haplessness of a young, newly married couple, but on American society. Language shifts from deeply evocative particulars to slang-saturated dialogue, all played out in Shirley's mind. Memories provide an interacting dialogue in the story where recollections of the convention's events mingle with memories of Shirley's response to these events. The dialogue traces personal disintegration and the hollowness of the national belief that material success is spiritually fulfilling.

Hecht quotes a line from Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* (1851) at the start of *The Venetian Vespers*, which prefigures the next sections of "The Short End": "Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (Hecht *Vespers* vi). Shirley's visible world has collided with a frightening reality that denies all semblance of decency, leaving only despair.

Section Four begins with an explicit reference to the cinematic technique of "fade out" to a soundtrack featuring the Tin Pan Alley song, "Hello! Ma Baby" (15). The soundtrack bridges the "fade in with pan shot" and Shirley's next memory. The "jump cut" takes us to the Midwest plains where a bizarre carnival act is taking place. The damage done by the revelations at the conference are deep and permanent. The drama moves to a country highway somewhere south of the Virginian town of Wheeling, where a macabre exhibition is on display. Norman is now called "Kit" and the carny shops of the Atlantic City boardwalk are brought back and transformed into a much more sinister show entailing: "A LIVE ENTOMBMENT – CONTRIBUTIONS PLEASE" (15). As part of the show, George Rose is on display, buried alive in the casket supplied by "The Memento Morey Funeral Home" and protected by "State Troopers" (15).

Such live burials were a part of both the cinema and carnival freak shows in 1930s America. Tod Browning, the director of the horror film *Freaks* (1932), began his career in show business as "The Hypnotic Living Corpse", a live burial act (Skal 25-26, 168). George Rose is

this poem's equivalent. This scene is a bizarre and macabre conflation of commerce, personal exhibition and state involvement and the parodied quotation from Tertullius is tasteless in the extreme (Tertullian 33).

Shirley is transfixed:

Through this plain aperture she now beheld
 The pale, expressionless features of George Rose,
 Bearded, but with a pocked, pitted complexion,
 And pale blue eyes conveying by their blankness
 A boredom so profound it might indeed
 Pass for a certain otherworldliness,
 Making it eminently clear to all
 That not a single face that showed itself
 Against the sky for his consideration
 Was found by him to be beautiful or wise
 Or worthy of the least notice or interest.

(Hecht *Vespers* 16)

For her, life is a freak show, one which is devoid of all hope and summons to mind Arnold's maudlin cry in "Dover Beach" (Arnold 209). But whereas Arnold seeks solace in his companion, Shirley stares into the middle distance and is greeted with a landscape of desolation, despair and an utter negation of life:

A grizzled landscape, burdock and thistle-choked,
 A snarled, barbed-wire barricade of brambles,
 All thorn and needle-sharp hostility.

(Hecht *Vespers* 17)

There is a pause, a stasis in time as Shirley absorbs the scenery's implications, much like that experienced by the family in "1945" when the young soldier draws his gun. This desolation packs menace. The only extant life is "mildew, cobwebs, slug and maggot" (17). Shirley is trapped in her own parody of the American dream, twisted and without hope. The poem recalls Auden's, "A plain without a feature, bare and brown.//No blade of grass, no sign of

neighbourhood,” (Auden 454). The voice of “Miss McIntosh”, her old Latin teacher, heralds the entombment of Shirley herself (18). Miss McIntosh is surely Azrael bringing Shirley’s personal *memento mori*. Her lesson is crystal clear, for while the etymology of conjugal and conjugation may be wedded in the concept of a joining together and *amare* in Latin means love, in Italian it refers to a bitter herbal liqueur. For Shirley this is a desperately bitter epiphany, which she must recognise. Her life is a freak show, and it is set in a much harsher psychological geography than that invoked in Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone” (“There is no love; // There are only the various envies, all of them sad”) (Auden 415). Description as part of the narrative is replete with significance. Love is repudiated, and Shirley must forsake “all others you have known or dreamed of or incontinently longed for” (Hecht *Vespers* 18). Her “God” is to be George Rose. Memory, dreams and apparitions have all merged into one revolting mental landscape. Recollection merges past and present.

Music again ushers in the final mise-en-scène. Hecht’s film concludes in the present, where Shirley, drunk, has an advertisement for Drambuie from the *New Yorker* the latter being, a symbol of American culture, open on her lap. The advertisement depicts an idyllic couple looking north from Washington Square’s triumphal arch:

She wears an evening gown of shocking pink
And a mink stole. Her escort, in black tie,
Standing behind her, his arms about her waist,
Follows her gaze uptown where a peach haze
Is about to infuse the windows of the rich.

Meanwhile, this couple, who have just descended
From a hansom cab departing towards the east,
Have all Fifth Avenue stretched out before them
In Élysée prospectus, like the calm fields
Where Attic heroes dwell. They are alone
On the blank street. The truths of economics,
The dismal (decimal) science, dissolve away
In the faint light and leave her standing there,
Shirley herself, suddenly slim again,
In the arms of a young nameless gentleman.

(Hecht *Vespers* 19)

All the promises and the hollow semiotic of success are summoned from that advertisement. This is the American dream returned and Shirley is restored and made new, washed with “the palest tints of dawn” of a new day (19). It is a mythic scene with reference to the fields of Elysium and the heroes of ancient Greece. Such dreams transcend the base commerciality that drives the “media buy” in the magazine. Shirley and the “nameless gentlemen” are drowned in the “beneficences of dawn” suffused with “salmon hues” turning skyscrapers into beacons of promise (19). Material wealth once again promises emotional peace. But, as with the convention in Atlantic City, such aspirations are false. The drunken fantasy, in which Shirley has entered as participant, turns macabre and wreaks horrible revenge on her, revealing the folly of her beliefs. At the heart of this restorative image of Manhattan at dawn, stands the carriage lantern whose flame is “incandescent white” (20) capturing not only the celestial hues of dawn but all the lurid colours of her pillows. The flame is transfixing, undeviating, demanding her total concentration as it performs its dance: “A sinuous, erotic wavering” (20). At its heart, there is the vision of a resurrected George Rose:

Arisen, youthful, strong and roseate,
 Tiny, of course, pathetically reduced
 To pinky size, but performing a lewd dance
 Of Shiva, the rippling muscles of his thighs
 And abdomen as fluent as a river
 Of upward-pouring colour, the golden finish
 Of Sardanapalus, emphatic rhythms
 Of blues and body language, a centrifuge
 Of climbing braids that beautifully enlarge,
 Thicken and hang pendulous in the air.
 Out of these twinings, foldings, envelopings
 Of brass and apricot, biceps and groin,
 She sees the last thing she will ever see:
 The purest red there is, passionate red,
 Fire-engine red, the red of Valentines,
 Of which she is herself the howling centre.

(20-21)

Not only does Shirley see this imagined figure but we are invited to engage with Shiva, the cosmic dancer and destroyer of a weary world and with the notorious decadence of the Assyrian king Sardanapalus. The overtly erotic language feeds into the repetition in the final lines where “red” is repeated unrelentingly, fastened to an immolating passion and the cries of unrelieved pain as Shirley is burnt to death by her dropped cigarette. The final revelation is visceral for she will never know love— certainly not the “passional red... the purest red there is.” Within the poem’s cinematic structure there is constant visual reference to hues of red: “redly carnal” pillows, the “Magenta” of the boardwalk shops’ feather boas, the “rouge” of old bricks and the “shocking pink” of her evening gown. The colour red suggests Shirley’s emotional state. The real bargain struck through buying into the American dream is the abnegation of any capacity to understand the emotional depth or the true “red” of living.

Hecht reinvigorates poetry’s capacity for telling a story about others, by incorporating film editing and visual techniques, which, in turn, distance and structure sequences events that depict the couple’s journey of despair. The capacity to reinvigorate narrative is also achieved in the direct, idiomatic speech of the protagonists set within well-recognised American social events, customs, dreams, and beliefs.

These poems have realised, in different ways, Hecht’s capacity to create types of character and to stretch poetics to encompass stories that unfold over time. All are set into a social context where the characters’ actions are seen in context to others and to the world in which they live.

Hecht pushes one step further and asks what is it that makes us alive? “See Naples and Die”, from *The Transparent Man*, addresses this question although it caused tension between Hecht and his long-time friend Joseph Brodsky (Hecht *Transparent* 21). In a letter to Brodsky, after the latter expressed unfavourable views on the poem (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 219), Hecht does not hold back:

I am reeling with bewilderment and dismay for quite some time after I read what you have written. And now am still at a loss to account for your overwhelmingly negative reaction to my poem. You profoundly shook my confidence in my work generally, and in that poem in particular. (Hecht *Letters* 234)

Believing that Brodsky “had gravely misunderstood the poem and my intent”, Hecht seems to be reacting to the complaint that the narrative is too thin for the size of the poem (234). In the letter, he describes the poem as a “commentary”⁶² on the events in Genesis, in particular, the temptation, fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (235). He also refers to the importance of the poem’s epigraph, from Simone Weil, which, at its most fundamental level, asks us to be involved in life rather than being a mere observer (235).

What he speaks of at length, though, is the reference to Genesis, saying that the poem is

mainly, however an account of the visions of paradise and of damnation that are glimpsed in the course of mundane affairs. Its speaker is one of the damned; one who fails to understand what has happened to him. He reveals more than he understands himself...he is figuratively blind and there is irony in his pride in being a careful observer, especially when he gets cheated during the temptation scene. (236).

“See Naples and Die” won the Mary Elinor Smith Poetry Prize in 1990, but the poem divided reviewers. In his review of the collection in which it was published, James Panabaker says that poems such as this one are of a “high standard” but that “the formal stylistics occasionally over-power the material” (Panabaker 252). Lachlan Mackinnon in his *TLS* review speaks of this poem as lacking the eloquence of its forebear, “The Venetian Vespers” (Mackinnon 4). Yet Henry Taylor describes “See Naples and Die” as a poem that showcases Hecht “at his best” (Taylor 235).

⁶² The underlining is used in *The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht* and is taken directly from Hecht’s letter to Joseph Brodsky (Hecht 235).

Hecht visited Naples with his first wife and, on another visit, met Auden there (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 38). It was at this time that his marriage to Patricia irretrievably broke down, and she returned to America without him (14). While it might be a commentary on Genesis, the poem is also suffused with these personal events.

The cautionary epigraph from Weil ("It is better to say 'I am suffering', than to say, 'This landscape is ugly'") affirms that involvement in life is better than detached observation. The first section of the poem goes on to present a central character who is, or appears to be, an acute and dispassionate observer of his surroundings (21). Objectivity is made possible by the distance that separates him from the events he is about to retell. He is quite explicit:

We forget much, of course, and, along with facts,
Our strong emotions, of pleasure and of pain,
Fade into stark insensibility...
So I can read from my journal of that time
As if it were written by a total stranger.

(Hecht *Transparent* 21)

Here, the form and style are a continuation of the narrative poems from *The Venetian Vespers* such as "The Short End". However, this voice is devoid of involvement, as the narrator proceeds to detail the journal entries accurately on his visit to Naples with his wife, Martha. The double distancing of journal entry and past events does not, however, stop acute observations being recalled vividly.

The view of this earthly paradise is also doubled. We have the intimate and immediate scene of a feast befitting the table of Trimalchio, as the couple move from the blazing sun of the terrace indoors to see the smorgasbord lunch:

The Celtic coils and curves of primrose shrimp,
A speckled gleam of opalescent squid,
The mussels' pearl-blue niches, as unearthly
As Brazilian butterflies...

(21)

This kaleidoscope of images depicts mountains of seafood sculptured and cascading across the buffet table, but it seems a passive enjoyment, with no engagement from the narrator. We also have the Bay of Naples as setting for this feast: “The greatest amphitheatre in the world” (22). The afternoon’s sightseeing reveals a resplendent set of artefacts and fauna that are fired and floodlit by the sun which “Bespoke an unassailable happiness” (22). The section concludes with the following reflection:

I believe on that height I was truly happy,
 Though I know less and less as time goes on
 About what happiness is, unless it’s what
 Folk-wisdom celebrates as ignorance.
 Dante says that the worst of all torments
 Is to remember happiness once it’s passed.
 I am too numb to know whether he’s right.

(22)

A state of being devoid or unable to feel might be the sort of hell that would reflect Weil’s epigram. Certainly, there is no regret. In fact, happiness is trashed as being the by-product of ignorance.

As with “The Short End”, the narrative takes the form of a recollection. What is missing, though, is urgency in the storytelling. That urgency was invoked by the use of cinematic devices and colloquial speech in the earlier poem. Stupor pervades the metre’s languid movement, as it does in the detailed and ordered description of food and even the scenery. This may be argued to be a reflection of the state the narrator is in, but it tests the reader’s incentive to be engaged. The languor of style is epicene and at times overwhelming.

The second section describes an occasion of transgression and moral fall where the protagonist is tempted to break the law in relation to foreign exchange transactions in Italy. The reference to Dante’s *Inferno* is replicated in the candid description of Naples’ decadence and its whores:

A corps of thirty-thousand registered sinners,
 Taxed and inspected, issued licenses
 For the custom of their bodies...

(23)

In addition,

There were accounts, as well, of female beggars
 With doped and rented children, and a rich trade
 In pathos by assorted mendicants.

(23)

This seductive and pervasive corruption, seductive and all-pervasive, leads to the narrator's attempt to get a better exchange rate on the black market. His hubris comes from wishing to "exhibit worldly cunning" and indulge in a transaction that, while illegal, is also morally suspect (23). Malevolence surrounds the foreign exchange deal, and his consequential fall from grace is humiliating. "Ercole" is portrayed with all the vulgar braggadocio and accoutrements of the small-time crook (25). The observations are exact, but the narrator's seeing ignores the significance of the actions or an understanding of their consequences:

And we made our exchange. And then he smiled
 A smile of condescension and insolence,
 Waved to me with a well-manicured hand
 On which he wore a number of gold rings
 And disappeared. Throughout this both of us
 Knew we had been intensively observed
 By the two thugs who stood across the square.

(24-25)

The inevitable chicanery is revealed when the narrator returns home to find his wad of bills are "almost wholly folded newspaper" (25). That he does not have the energy to remain furious is worrying, for he acquiesces to the culture of "Neapolitan sinners" and rationalises this worrying behaviour as an act necessary for survival (25). This story is a compromise of morals, not just a failure to observe with any critical judgement.

The poem drives to extend the scope of the narrative into a moral dimension in much the same way as was achieved in “The Short End” and much earlier in the “General Prologue” of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer 118-62).⁶³ How well are the role and character of the narrator realised here? Hecht is embarked on an ambitious task. This narrator is supremely passive and is recalling events long past. The poem is event-packed: there is the illegal money exchange, the uncertain memory, the disdain for Ercole, the thugs’ mistaken motives, and the near-myopic descriptions of costume and appearances. Any suggestion of a reference to the fall from grace in *Genesis* is drowned out by the introduction of Dante’s *Inferno*. Additionally, in this section, there is no moral compass; so the observations float, rudderless, around the story. The damned may be internally handicapped: their observations, no matter how acute, are devoid of judgement.

Section three is in two parts: the pastoral scene that leads to the section of the poem on Bellini’s *The Transfiguration*, and the sudden appearance of a child’s funeral procession. Despite the bucolic serenity of the opening, we are soon reminded that where these sheep safely graze is, in fact, a graveyard. The narrator is amongst them as well, and that his observations are askew is quickly registered with his misreading of Bellini’s painting. The poem depicts Moses and Elijah speaking to a transfigured Christ with the apostles James, John and Peter at their feet in adoration, not five apostles, as the narrator would have it. Moreover, this painting is in the Museo Capodimonte, not the Nazionale, which, unlike Post, I consider to be of some significance as it plays into the storyteller’s disconnect from life. Post makes the further observation that the narrator delivers a

rhapsodic reading of the painting – a verbal parallel to the opening luncheon scene taking place... The narrator’s ambitious understanding of “The entire course of human history” in the painting is undermined from the start when he misidentifies the two figures holding “Fragments of scroll with Hebrew lettering” with Peter and John. The figures are traditionally identified with Moses and Elijah. (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 220)

⁶³ I consider Chaucer’s moral tales to be more engaging.

His subsequent musings on its significance would also indicate a man who has lost grip. He also cannot see what the Christ figure is looking at: “On something just behind and above our heads, // Invisible unless we turned, and then // The mystery would indeed still be behind us” (Hecht *Transparent* 26). This inability to comprehend any type of significance is complemented by an added gloss on the Bellini that celebrates unfeeling as a divine and desired state. Christ is at the centre of “a day so glorious” to explain “human misery and suffering” (27):

And so we feel, gazing upon a world
From which all pain has cleanly been expunged
By a pastoral hand, moving in synchronous
Obedience to a clear and pastoral eye.

(27)

The Weil epigraph is denied. Observation is all, devoid of any understanding or connection. The world is an ideal “pastoral”, without human blemish, and the word “gaze” is repeated, adding to the disconnection, as though we are viewing a specimen in a petri dish or through a microscope. A funeral procession interrupts the tourists as they walk out from the museum:

Only to be confronted by the *pompe*
Funebri of six jet-black harnessed chargers,
Each with black ostrich plumes upon his head,
Drawing a carriage-hearse, also beplumed,
Black but glass-walled, and bearing a black coffin
Piled with disorderly hot-house profusions
Of lilies, gladioli, and carnations.
The sidewalk throngs all cross themselves, and Martha
Seems especially and mysteriously upset
In ways I fail to understand until
Back in our room she breaks out angrily:
“Didn’t you see how small the coffin was?”

(27)

This funeral procession is an abrupt, shocking intrusion of life and its tragedies, but is viewed by Martha and her husband very differently. One describes only appearances

whereas the other is upset by what the procession captures: human tragedy and grief. Martha is alert to the world with all its human suffering and is engaged in it. The narrator is bedazzled by appearances but devoid of emotional connection. The funeral not only interrupts, it divides; in stark terms, the funeral suggests the distance of the protagonist from life. There is the sense that he, too, is dead and is looking back, as Christ does in the painting, to a place now unreachable and past. Martha cannot abide being with a dead man.

The next section begins with numerous classical references to the underworld. The dissonance between Martha and her husband has become constant and the scene's centrepiece, a parade of grotesques:

They are extraordinary: stunted, maimed,
Thalidomide deformities, small, fingerless,
Mild pigmentless albinos, shepherded
Into a squeaky file by earnest nuns
Between the sunlit bushes of azaleas.
They seem like raw material for the painting
Of Bosch's *Temptation of St. Anthony*:
Wild creatures, partly human, but with claws
Or camel humps, or shrivelled, meager heads.

(28)

The parade may be seductively fascinating to the narrator as he details the mutants and their deformities by referring to Bosch's *Temptation of St Anthony*, but it is a horror to Martha, who flees. Nor is she, when found, comforted by the advice that in the face of such calamities they need "To form for ourselves a carapace of sorts//A self-preservative petrific toughness" (29). The narrator's divorce from the world is confirmed when his only morning memory is azaleas.

Certainly, the sense of disconnect that is evident in the previous section is amplified here in language that is as rich as the observations are acute and detailed. The narrator is in hell, completely unaware of his situation. Martha's aversion acts as a counterpoint. The issue is how this poetic style copes under the weight of such a detached, inhuman narrator, devoid of emotional involvement. With the determined and deliberate continuation of an approach

that emphasises the narrator's condition, there is a danger of a lack of dramatic compression which denies the poem immediacy and impact. The challenge set by taking on this style may be too great.

As mentioned, "The Short End" keeps one's attention by appropriating cinematic terminology and is explicit about its moral judgements. Here, such a technique is not possible as this story is owned by a condemned and drifting soul. "This is it", claims the tour guide Raimondo near the end of the next section, as he leads Martha and the narrator to a place called "Elysian Fields" (31-32). But, before they arrive at this "vacant wilderness of weeds", they are escorted to *Charon's Cave* and witness the macabre "death" of a dog, overcome by the fumes belching from a volcanic fissure in the cave's floor:

A man and a mongrel now enter the cave,
 Answering Raimondo's summons. We are to view
 The ghastly and traditional death-scene.
 But only after the no less traditional
 And ceremonious haggling about fees,
 A routine out of *commedia dell'arte*.
 And then by the scruff of the neck, the master forces
 His dog's head close to a rank and steaming fissure
 Where fumes rise from the earth, the stink of Dis,
 That place of perfect hospitality
 "Whose ancient door stands open night and day."
 The dog's eyes widen in unseeing terror;
 It yelps feebly, goes into wild convulsions,
 And then falls limp with every semblance of
 Death. Being then removed and laid
 Near the cave's mouth, in about thirty seconds
 It starts to twitch and drool, then shakes itself,
 And presently staggers to its four feet.
 With a broad wink and conspiratorial smile,
 Raimondo says that by modest computation
 That dog dies three hundred times a year.⁶⁴

(31)

⁶⁴ The "its" in line 18 of this quoted section of the poem was omitted in the first edition but included in the second printing of Hecht's *Collected Later Poems* (2003).

Raimondo is the reincarnation of Ercole, in a refashioning of Dante's inferno, dealing in counterfeit death. Whatever connection Naples has as a place of pleasure and "apolaustic" experiences collapses into a malevolent series of impressions; a nightmare world where all living things are spectral and distorted. Death itself is mocked (30). We are invited to tour hell. References to death and its geography abound, along with the Sybil's advice to Aeneas, Dante's *Inferno*, Dis, Charon, and the Mare Morto Lake at Misenum (30-31).

Even Virgil's description of the Elysian Fields is found to be a lie. Instead, there is "wild ungoverned growth", a "worthless", "thick" field amongst gravestones dotted by a "discourse of guides" and "bewildered tourists" like souls in a green inferno of "desolation" (32). The bizarre mise-en-scène of the dog certainly lends itself to an overwrought language and acts out a twisted parody of the Oracle of Delphi. The question then remains about how convincing the layering of myth and death is; and whether it fits with the character of our storyteller, or whether we are asking too much of a clearly damaged soul.

The matter-of-factness of the first line in the final section comes as a relief after the baroque, smothering syntax that has preceded it. Simplicity of language, if not insight, is restored to the protagonist. While the comment about the many ways marriages come to grief is a matter-of-fact statement which the narrator unpicks with clinical precision, the blindness of insight is still present:

It seems to me in fact that Martha and I
Were somehow victims of a nameless blight
And dark interior illness...
The cold, envenoming spirit of Despair,
Turning what was the nectar of the world
To ashes in our mouths. We were the cursed
To whom it seemed no joy was possible,
The spiritually warped and handicapped.

That observation certainly may be true of the protagonist, but what of Martha? The divorce seems to be caused by the incapability of her husband to do anything but observe as he is totally detached from life. For all intents and purposes, he is emotionally and spiritually dead. These seriously mistaken musings are his own. Hell might be about being stuck in an ugly landscape; it is not only a “vision I received” but for him, a fact (34). He is so unlike Pliny the Elder who, full of curiosity at the eruption of Mt Vesuvius, ventured forth with a pillow tied to his head to satisfy a thirst for scientific knowledge.

The horror of what Pliny sees in fact slowly dawns on him. Through Pliny’s eyes, he understands where he is. The subsequent earthquake drains the bay, revealing a seabed:

Of naked horrors lighted now and then
By jets of fire and sheet-lightning flares,
Only to be folded back into the dark.
One could make out in such brief intervals
An endless beach littered with squirming fish,
With kelp and timbers strewn on muddy flats,
Giant sea-worms bright with a glittering slime,
Crabs limping in their rheumatoid pavane.

(34)

These final lines are unrelenting and drive home a horrific revelation. To be apart from life, to lose all contact, is an inferno just as nightmarish as that witnessed by Pliny.

On Hecht’s death, Jan Schreiber wrote specifically about “See Naples and Die” in *The Achievements of Anthony Hecht*, as she went about trying to sum up his poetic legacy. She begins by asking of this poem:

What should we make of this? We do not have a traditional lyric with an intense focus on a perception that fixes the experience in the reader’s psyche. Nor do we have a tragedy: the actions are not large enough.....yet the narrative borrows techniques of lyric meter, symbolic scenes and figurative language. In this particular poem these heightened devices are offset by the random ordering of scenes and the avoidance of causal connections among events, so the cumulative effect is not

intense. It is an effect not of woe or wonder, but of sadness, perplexity, and – viewed from the proper angle – of quiet revelation. (Schreiber)

Schreiber has recognised the dangers of the poem's hybrid structure and the way in which the protagonist's worsening situation has been carefully worked from section to section. The narrator is dead to humanity and himself. His erroneous interpretation of the Bellini painting makes subsequent musings all the more intense, as we see the Weil epigraph writ large. Is this successful? As mentioned, I am unsure the marrying of Genesis with Dante's *Inferno* is sustained.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* springs to mind, with its tight, unrelenting unravelling of a man's values and life as he dies, but the poem does demonstrate Hecht's experimental approach to poetics as he stretches the bounds of a formal approach. Moreover, the thinness of the story may be inherent in the very subject matter Hecht considers, the narrator's self-obsession, and so the poem is itself, as Post describes it, "a tight rope walking over a void" contemplating absence (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 224). This is a story told by someone who is a dead soul with no connection to the world which might be equally challenging. The narrator's narcissism is considered as both a personal failure but also from a collective perspective: it damages his connection to others, in this instance, his wife Martha. "The Short End" and "See Naples and Die" speak of a social detachment and "death" that are possibly detrimental to the reader if the story goes unheeded. The multifarious aspects of our human failures are on show and one cannot help but think of these poems as, in some ways, sermons.

There is one further element in the creating of characters I wish to consider: direct speech. Aristotle describes it as an important element of dramatic poetry (Aristotle 35). Hecht's collection *Flight Amongst The Tombs* has a section of poems sub-titled *The Presumptions of Death* (Hecht *Flight* 3-52), a sequence of dramatic monologues where "Death" appears in a number of guises, doubled characters if you like, and speaks from each character's unique perspective. Death's incarnations are many and varied. Here, Death takes on those character's forms and variations which are accompanied by woodcuts created by Leonard Baskin (3-52).

Both poems and woodcuts take their inspiration from the medieval trope of Death, leading men of all rank and conditions into the grave. Hans Holbein produced wood engravings which are clearly a model for Baskin's creations. Holbein's woodcuts are full of intricate detail whereas Baskin's are spare. Hecht's poems are technical and complex in form and variation, taking on Holbein's intricacy. Conversely, in Holbein, the partners of death in the dance vary in profession and station. In *Presumptions of Death*, it is "Death" itself that comes to speak in various incarnations. "Death" has taken on the guise of the dance partner: they are one and the same. Hecht explicitly speaks of this twist on the medieval depictions in a letter to Daniel Albright, where he wants "Death" to play "all possible human roles" (Hecht Letters 261). I agree with Post when he says that these "impersonations" of Death should be read individually, since they were "conceived" as such (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 231). He also has a detailed explication of the poems' ekphrastic dimensions, which is not a matter I wish to pursue here (231-34). He praises the sequence, saying that it provides "an ideal introduction to this most sophisticated of Poets" (239).

Jan Schreiber's view is different. She comments on the unevenness of the sequence but concedes that in sum, the "poems achieve a fierce and persuasive eloquence" (Schreiber). I will discuss the possible reasons for this "unevenness" at the end of this chapter but want first to continue the inquiry into Hecht's self-declared attempt to reintroduce character, here through direct speech, in an imaginative and dramatic way as he explores our inevitable end.

"Death the Whore" is one in this sequence of poems that is both excoriatingly tragic and compelling. Death's female voice is all-encompassing. This voice has "taken hold" of the monologue assuming a familiarity that sounds threatening, presumptive and omniscient. The voice evokes two discrete moments in time, past and present. During this soliloquy, Death addresses an unidentified listener. We are witness to a strangely familiar, strangely foreboding relationship:

...And what, my dear,
 Does this remind you of? You are surprised
 By the familiar manner, the easy, sure
 Intimacy of my address. You wonder,
 Whose curious voice is this?...

(Hecht *Flight* 37)

Commas are used to great effect. The questions are teasing, the parenthetical “my dear” malicious and patronising. A macabre version of Proust’s memory-inducing madeleines is conjured by the thin grey smoke twisting in winter, hazily glimpsed in retrospect. It is difficult not to think of the gas ovens’ smoke in the reference to “German silver in the sullen dusk//From a small chimney” (37). This voice is the ghost of someone known once long ago and who, in this ghostly incarnation, lives still. For the listener, the ghost’s definitive recollection and presence can be found in “the eclipses of your mind,//Those sinkholes, culverts, cisterns long avoided//As dangerous, where the actual answer lies” (38). The first section ends with a conflation of the image of smoke and the faltering voice. The shadows of the landscape tease out a half-life of recollection never quite grasped. But the implied horror is palpable. The voice, despite being ephemeral, has a lurking menace and teases the listener maliciously: not just as a victim, but as someone deeply involved in the consequences of a not yet revealed tragedy. The ghost consumes the dramatic conversation. While demonstrating how memory is diffuse, uncertain and inaccurate, this ghost also exudes an acute and sure understanding of the psychology of the addressee, akin to that in “Green: An Epistle”. Suppression is part of the listener’s denial, and if memory chooses not to remember the intimate relation the ghost has with the protagonist, it allows the ghost to probe and reveal. The listener has no choice but to engage, as the ghost has a distinct, half-remembered character’s voice. A powerful evocation of a children’s memory game gives this ghost and its memories further shape and reflects Hecht’s emphasis on detail in moments of stasis. The knowledge of the game is exact and evocative:

Think of the memory game that children played
 So long ago. A grownup brought a tray
 Laden with objects hidden by a shawl
 Or coverlet with fine brocaded flowers
 Beneath which, like the roofs of a small city,
 Some secret things lay cloaked. Then at a signal
 The cloth was whisked away for thirty seconds.
 You were allowed to do nothing but look,
 And then the cover was replaced. Remember?
 The tray contained bright densely crowded objects,
 Sometimes exotic – a small cloisonné egg,
 A candle-snuffer with an ivory handle –
 But simple things as well. It never occurred
 To any of the children here to count them;
 You had been told simply to memorize
 The contents of the tray. Each child was given
 Paper and pencil to list what he recalled
 And no one ever finally got them all.

(37-38)

This moment is precise and can trigger memories half-forgotten in a similar way to the child's memory game described in Kipling's *Kim* (Kipling 158, 1987). This is the kernel of the opening section, which ends with a succession of taunting, teasing questions about what is half-forgotten, much to the annoyance of the addressee:

Let me give you a hint. The voice you hear
 Is not the voice of someone you remember –
 Or rather, it's that voice now greatly altered
 By certain events of which you've partly heard,
 Partly imagined, altogether feared.
 Does that help? No, I didn't think it would.

(38)

Questions pile up as interrogation delves to extract innermost thoughts. Hecht has combined and externalised the addressee's psychological profile through Death's interrogation of his memory. The ghost gives gentle admonishment. One needs to be "abstracted", disembodied and detached from the day to day to comprehend whose the

voice might be and its association with the smoke. The sequence is an allegory where the voice and the smoke veil meaning but are deeply engaged with this character. The Baskin wood engraving accompanying this poem is of a naked woman shouldered by a skeleton. In the woodcut, Death appears more alive than the slumped figure. This woman is a hollow medium, a bit like a Delphic oracle for death. She is both as real and as insubstantial as her memories. The ekphrastic element of this poem adds complexity to the monologue. A precise description of the dead woman's descent into prostitution and drug addiction replaces indefinite memories and is unrelentingly depressing. Job's despair is invoked: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night *in which* it was said, there is a man child conceived" (Job 3.3). The barrenness and the tacky references to a "Victoria's Secret" catalogue, as well as the predictability of this life, are in stark contrast to the depth of death's invocations in section one. Time has no meaning for the dead, but for the living, memory, time and what triggers both, are woven slowly together as the monologue unfolds:

And then you linger upon one. It's me.
 Don't be surprised. All that was long ago.
 Your indolent thought goes over my young breasts,
 Remembering, fondling, exciting you.
 How very long ago that was. It lasted
 Almost two years. Two mainly happy years.
 In all that time, what did you learn of me?
 My name, my body, how best to go about
 Mutual arousal, my taste in food and drink
 And what would later be called "substances."
 (These days among my friends I might be called
 'A woman of substance' if I were still around.)
 You also learned, from a casual admission,
 That I had twice attempted suicide.
 Tact on both sides had left this unexplored.
 We both seemed to like sex for the same reason.
 It was, as they used to say, a "little death,"
 A tiny interval devoid of thought
 When even sensation is so localized
 Only one part of the body seems alive.

(Hecht *Flight* 39)

Now the voice's focus is sharp. Self-mocking humour reinforces Death's supreme control. With clinical disembodiment, she coolly itemises the nature of the relationship with her former lover. The objectification is pornographic. An old pun on death defines orgasm. Relentless clarity colours the voice, and there is nowhere to hide. One or half-line sentences allow no room for speculation as Death proceeds to end life and hope. There is no question as to who is in control in this slow, calculated dissection of a past relationship.

The section ends with the description of a total annihilation of self where through cremation, she achieves "More of oblivion that I even hoped for" (40). The woman's spectral voice and Death are different sides of the same coin:

And now when I occur to you, the voice
 You hear is not the voice of what I was
 When young and sexy and perhaps in love,
 But the weary voice shaped in your later mind
 By a small sediment of fact and rumour,
 A faceless voice, a voice without a body.

As for the winter scene of which I spoke –
 The smoke, my dear, the smoke. I am the smoke.

(Hecht *Flight* 40)

"Sediment" speaks of the recollected dust particles of a relationship, and death's voice is "shaped" within the listener's mind. The rhyme of "spoke" with "smoke" that joins the voice of the poem's ineffable opening image to the final line is relentless, tightening the grip of the voice and its weight on the listener. The repetition, dramatic pauses and the return of that vaguely threatening, all-knowing "my dear" convey intimate and immediate dread. The structure of "Death the Whore" is reminiscent of "The Grapes". The voice here is sharper, but both poems lead the reader to an epiphany about the finality of life and the all-encompassing power of death. In both, what works is the seamless balance between emotional impact, irony and intellectual revelation where characters are realised with great dramatic effect.

Death's characters are realised in the varied formal construction Hecht uses in this sequence of poems. Take "Death the Hypocrite" for example. It has a standard structure: iambic pentameter, with variation, in four-line stanzas. It holds within it destruction and extreme nihilism. Baudelaire's "To The Reader" informs the structure of this poem. Compare the opening stanza of the Baudelaire poem with the second stanza of Hecht's:

La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine,
Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps,
Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords,
Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine.

Folly and error, avarice and vice,
Employ our souls and waste our bodies' force.
As mangy beggars incubate their lice,
We nourish our innocuous remorse.

(Baudelaire 3)

Your kiss, your car, cocktail and cigarette,
Your lecheries in fancy and in fact,
Unkindnesses you manage to forget,
Are ritual prologue to the final act

(Hecht *Flight 5*)

Not only are the rhyming and the quatrain-form similar, but they shadow each other in thought. Baudelaire speaks of general decadence and corruption. Hecht speaks about the same thing in more particular terms. Hypocrisy is about a false profession of virtue or of feelings that are of a higher order than the ones we actually possess. "Death" reminds us that he is inevitable, but we may continue to deny this and postpone it:

You claim to loathe me, yet everything you prize
Brings you within the reach of my embrace.
I see right through you though I have no eyes;
You fail to know me even face to face.

(Hecht *Flight 5*)

Derisive in tone, “Death” mockingly lists the barrenness of our lives. We are certainly hypocrites when we are asked to face Death, who makes a clear case for our continuing denial. Death’s attitude recalls Edmund’s speech in *King Lear* when he says “This is the excellent foppery of the world” (Shakespeare “King Lear” 1.2.2018). The seemingly essential activities, whether material or sexual, are brushed aside as pretence.

The rhymes in the first stanza highlight the tangible and corporeal, but are undercut by the content in two-line sentences that make up the stanza. What we may say and what the facts are completely different. The metre of the second stanza (above) drives the argument and inevitable conclusion that it is “Death” that wins, for all else is a nonsense. Moreover, “Death” not only determines the span of human life but destroys nature itself, which has a much greater claim to eternity:

...Nickels and dimes
 Are but the cold coin of a realm that’s mine.
 I’m the acute accountant of your crimes
 As of your real estate. Bristlecone pine,

 Whose close-ringed chronicles mock your regimen
 Of jogging, vitamins, and your strange desire
 To disregard your assigned three-score and ten,
 Yields to my absolute instrument of fire.

(Hecht *Flight 5*)

If this were the complete tenor of the poem then it would fail, for we see no semblance that death is a hypocrite; rather, he is one who delivers justice upon those who would deny his capacity to end all life. It is not until the final stanza that death’s hypocrisy is described:

You know me, friend, as Faustus, Baudelaire,
 Boredom, Self-Hatred, and, still more, Self-Love.
Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère,
 Acknowledge me. I fit you like a glove.

(5)

Ironically, Faustus was offered eternal life by the devil, but respect for one's own life cannot be given by its destroyer. The third line is the last line of Baudelaire's poem, which turns on the reader, accusing us all of hypocrisy. However, I am not convinced that the case for "Death's" own hypocritical character has been successfully made. "Death" still stands apart as the final arbiter that speaks the truth to our delusions.

If death can be ourselves and our delusive behaviour, then it can also be the final arbiter of appearance. "Death The Painter" considers this perspective on "Death's" character. The poem is in three six-line stanzas with the rhyming pattern a,b,c,b,a,c. In a letter to Eleanor Cook, Hecht refers to his "habitual recourse to six line stanzas":

A quatrain is too predictable, whether a,b,b,a or a,b,a,b. A quatrain with an added couplet is no more than simply that. Odd numbers of lines involve at least three rhymes of the same kind for a five line stanza, and more with a longer one. Rhyme Royal and Spenserian stanzas are either too artificial and antiquated, or they call undue attention to themselves as technical problems to be solved. (Hecht *Letters* 282)

Each stanza in "Death The Painter" is sculpted, with the second and fourth lines being much shorter:

Snub-nosed, bone-fingered, deft with engraving tools,
 I have alone been given
 The powers of Joshua, who stayed the sun
 In its traverse of heaven.
 Here in this Gotham of unnumbered fools
 I have sought out and arrested everyone.

(Hecht *Flight* 29)

Death creates a skull using “engraving tools” and captures the power both he and artists have, with the word “deft” underlining the black humour. Both “Death” and artist change how we see things and both make time stand still, as Joshua did at the walls of Jericho. The shortened three-foot lines compact that power and its enormity. The verb “arrested” speaks of Death’s intervention, but also of Death as artist, producing a static canvas of all the world’s inhabitants:

Under my watchful eye all human creatures
 Convert to a *still life*,
 As with unique precision I apply
 White lead and palette knife.
 A model student of remodelled features,
 The final barber, the last beautician, I.

(29)

Hecht mentions in his Mellon lectures that both artist and poet ask the readers to “see”, enabling them to grasp “the visual appearance of something quite apart from and beyond the inked letters on the white page” (Hecht *Poetic Art* 23). He asks us to see the “*still life*” that “Death” makes of us all at the time of our demise. “White” is “Death’s” pallor and decay remodels features as hair falls out and the skull is revealed beneath the skin. There is a magisterial quality to “Death’s” voice as he goes about the business of creating an impression of the appearance we all take on as corpses. The rhyming pattern highlights the metamorphosis that is being wrought. The changed “life”, stilled, is juxtaposed to “knife”. Human “features” that make us distinct “creatures” in life, have radical, permanent changes applied by “Death”. This tight structure takes on the feel of a strait jacket:

You lordlings, what is Man, his blood and vitals,
 When all is said and done?
 A poor forked animal, a nest of flies.
 Tell us, what is this one
 Once shorn of all his dignities and titles,
 Divested of his testicles and eyes?

(Hecht *Flight* 29)

Death is not only the master craftsman but sovereign, as he echoes the lines from *King Lear*. Shakespeare's "groundlings" are changed to "lordlings" to magnify the arrogance and fall from grace that awaits us: "Unaccommodated// man is no more, but such a poor bare, forked animal" is given a new twist as it is applied to emphasise physical decay (Shakespeare "King Lear" 3.4.2045). The very focus of a portrait—that is, the eyes— are destroyed in death along with our capacity to procreate. This is majestically dismissive. In the face of "Death", we are seen as nothing. This poem is a better working of death as a painter than "Death, The Hypocrite". The character lives in the artist's activity and skill. There is no distance between "Death" and the persona he has assumed.

A quotation from *King Lear* (1.4), is the exordium to another poem in the sequence: "Death the Punchinello" (Hecht *Flight* 34). The quotidian [quotation?] reminds us that there is a little of "the fool" in all of us. The poem opens with a recounting of Plutarch's version of the death of Alcibiades, an Athenian general of great charm and beauty who died at an early age. But here, it seems, the ugly live on:

Now as for me, admittedly grotesque,
Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
Bearing an envious mountain on my back
Where sits deformity to mock my body,
I'm your imperishable comedian.

(35)

The beauty that perishes is juxtaposed to an ugliness that is self-knowing and claiming to be a provider of something more than a mere physical beauty, to charm. Longevity is Punchinello's distinct advantage. While nature's cruel joke is on him, with his twisted form, it is also on us, as readers. "Death", here, is taking on the character of a fictional caricature within the *Commedia Del Arte* tradition.⁶⁵ He is "imperishable" and forever "Vulgar, mean, selfish, undefeatable" (35).

⁶⁵ Improvised popular comedy in Italy during the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries with actors representing stock characters. Punchinello's cudgel had phallic overtones.

This is unlike the other personae that “Death” has assumed; all the others are representations of real people or attitudes. Here, he is disguised in a fictional character. He relegates Donne’s lovers to a cynical fiction and his “way with women”, with the “Love ‘em and leave ‘em” approach, taking on the blackest of humours (35). His love of them is the kiss of death, quite unlike the “dying” of the Elizabethan double entendre.

Punchinello takes no prisoners when it comes to our ideas of hope, beauty and truth that we cling to. He even recruits the young to his side, tapping into their innate aversion to controlled behaviour:

And nothing pleases the kids more than my cudgel.
 They see the justice of it, don’t you see.
 How, against all the odds, this ugly man,
 Hated, unmanumitted just like them,
 Wields his big stick and whacks authority
 Hard on its wooden head. I lack the graces
 That everyone observed in the young Greek,
 Women and men alike. He grew so vain
 He wouldn’t play the flute, claimed it distorted
 The sculptural virtues of his classic features.
 That, I would venture to say, is not my problem.

(35)

As Punchinello may be standing up for the excluded, thumbing his nose at authority, “Death” is thumbing his nose at life. The self-loathing and envy behind the mask are patent, as is his mockery of beauty. As a trickster, he distorts the innocence of children, wanting us to equate physical beauty with vanity. In fact, neither authority nor the “sculptural virtues” are his concern. By the poem’s end, Punchinello is unmasked. He is Jack Ketch, a sadistic executioner from the reign of Charles II:

And you, my dears, are the butt of all my jokes.
 In candor, I admit some do not like me.
 They call me "Toad," and they would not be far
 From the truth, if only they were speaking German.
 Nevertheless, in spite of such abuse,
 I have a joke that always breaks them up.
 Mine's the last laugh, the terminal ha-ha.
 As the poet said, "*Ce crapaud-là, c'est moi.*"

(35)

The human race is the butt of all his jokes, and one hears the Panzram declaration, "I wish all mankind had one neck so I could choke it!" (Earley 37). The cynicism of "some do not like me" is breathtaking. The reference to Tristian Corbière's "The Toad", with its "black romance", satanic overtones and its similarity to the German word for death, makes the "joke" at the end (Corbière 19). In many ways, the entire poem takes its foundation from Corbière. Both share a horror at the revelation or unmasking of death. For Corbière, it is the toad; for Hecht, Punchinello. "Death" knows all disguises and languages.

But does this character work? To produce a caricature of weight within a character is a considerable challenge. There is undoubtedly an erudite mind at work here. The references capture the double ironies that are part of the doubleness in Punchinello's depiction. There is no doubting that the acerbic wit that "Death" exhibits within this comic guise is well conceived. Our minds are certainly engaged and beguiled as we become aware of the extreme care Hecht takes, constructing a maze of historical and cultural references, but it seems a bloodless journey. On balance, a caricature may be too restricting to create a character. Certainly, in this instance, it does not work.

Nevertheless, for the most part, all of the character manifestations of "Death" in this sequence, carry within them acerbic wit and derision that only "Death" could harbor for the living. None more so than the final character I wish to consider: "Death the Oxford Don", a poem in ten rhyming couplets:

Sole heir to a distinguished laureate,
 I serve as guardian to his grand estate,
 And grudgingly admit the unwashed herds
 To the ten-point mausoleum of his words.
 Acquiring over years the appetite
 And feeding habits of a parasite,
 I live off the cold corpus of fine print,
 Habited with black robes and heart of flint,
 The word made flesh for me and me alone.
 I gnaw and gnaw the satisfactory bone.

(Hecht *Flight* 17)

These lines, with their Augustan style and subject matter, remind one of Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" (1988) where he notes "True taste as seldom is the critic's share" (Pope 1). Hecht spent much of his life as an academic and wrote a number of poems deploring some aspects of academia. The "Application for A Grant" demonstrates this (Hecht *Vespers* 26; *Flight*). Criticism, here, is depicted as death to the works of a great artist ("laureate") with the monopolizing critic acting as succubus.

Literary executors are represented as a parasitic life form. Executors justify their own existence by restricting access to the works of other writers. They add nothing. The closure at the end of each couplet creates the impression of neat precision without any sense that what is being considered is life-affirming or otherwise. There is little affection for the "unwashed herds". The speaker, dealing with dead words, has a soulless life that depicts a living death of the mind. Intellectual "appetite" is equated with "parasite". Words such as "flint" provide a barren landscape. The readers of the poetry are asked to enter a mausoleum where "Death" takes on the feeding habits of a maggot. As an academic, "Death" depicts the life of the mind as sterile and without creativity. This, again, reminds one of the admonitions in Pope's "An Essay on Criticism":

Of all the causes which conspire to blind
 Man's erring Judgment, and misguided mind,
 What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
 Is *Pride*, the *never-failing vice of fools*.

(Pope 1)

“The word made flesh for me and me alone” asks if it is only after our death that what we write and say matter. That being said, I am not convinced that this poem works in the same way as “Death the Whore” or “Death the Painter”. There is little sense that “Death” is anything more than a vehicle to pour scorn on those in academia who feed off the works of artists. The poem embodies a plea, similar to Pope’s, for us to read from the poem itself rather than extraneous material:

A perfect Judge will *read* each work of wit.
With the same spirit that its author writ:

In wit, as Nature, what affects our hearts
Is not the exactness of peculiar parts;
‘Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.

(Pope 6-7)

William Logan gave a lukewarm review to the collection in which these poems appear. In an essay entitled “Old Guys” (1996), he speaks of “Hecht’s elegant and dryly witty commentaries beyond the grave by looking at the grave. He must have jumped at the chance to caption such illustrations, the poems have such a show-offy, self-satisfied air, an air a little at odds with their subject” (Logan 67). Logan goes on to write that the sequence is “disappointingly workmanlike” (67). Hecht himself was of a different opinion, claiming that he felt that his work, “continues to improve” (Hecht *Letters* 281), although he expressed some self-doubt when he said in the same letter to Eleanor Cook:

Of course, there is a built in danger to the conviction that one is always getting better. It means that as one comes to think less and less well of one’s early work, put into the shade (by) this happy progressive view, that one may be right: the early work, of which one was so proud, may not be so good after all, and two hideous conclusions may be drawn from that. The first is that the present state of excellence may not be so great if it is merely an improvement upon what went before; and

secondly, that the illusion of present merit may be just as temporary as one's view of the past. The whole puzzle does not abide much thinking on. (282)

If character is the lens through which we read this sequence, then perhaps Logan's view is (in particular cases) correct. At times, though, the production of "Death" as a character does not quite work. "Punchinello" fails to merge caricature with "Death". Similarly, in "Death The Oxford Don", the concept of death as a character is pushed to one side at the expense of making a bitter retort to literary critics and academics. In both instances, the facility with language and the witty line do bite, but smartness devours the character and we are left with a cynical humour without dimension. Death is a man of straw used to discuss other matters.

However, the way in which "Death the Whore" sears into the reader's mind as death presiding on the excoriating decline of innocence through sexual abuse and psychological vulnerability is riveting. There is a "joint force" in the language that transcends the parts. The metaphor of "smoke" is ghostly, threatening and diabolical. Similarly, in "Death the Painter" the formal patterns and the transformation that takes place to the body at death work well. In the other cases, the poetry appears tired. Certainly, it is technically adroit, but it seems to be just going through the motions.

I want to conclude my chapter by considering a poem that, while not speaking of a particular character, seems to contextualise the aspects of human failure and deception that have been realised by Hecht's dramatic character stories so far considered. "A Brief Account of Our City" appears in Hecht's final collection. This poem features the voice of a tour guide pointing out particular buildings of historical interest and extolling the culinary delights of a particular German or possibly Austrian town. Through description, the guide is speaking directly to the reader. Additionally, as in many of Hecht's poems, "Birthday Poem", "Peripeteia" or "The Cost" for example, we are asked to pause and see the view. Again, as in these other poems, the view is just as much a mindscape for contemplation as a landscape:

If you approach our city from the south,
 The first thing that you will see is the Old Fort,
 High on its rock. Its crenelated walls,
 Dungeons and barbicans and towers date back
 To the eighth century....

(*Darkness* 19)

This place has history and was the scene of much of what is expected of feudal times: sieges, taxation of the poor, where the local barons were “masterful// Only in greed and management of arms.//Great murderous vulgar men” (19). Certainly the tour guide patter is skin deep, but even with this overly generalised description, the point is made. Violence was stock in trade for those who owned this castle, and the town has a history that was not peaceful. The fort itself is scattered with “pyramids of cannonballs”, the arsenal replete with arquebuses, bows, mortars and cannon (19). As our tour guide comments, though, there is something unnerving about this castle’s lack of human warmth. The guide describes the lasting impression as being in “the plain barren sparseness of the rooms” (20). Sightseeing raises questions related not to the material scene, but to the type of living that the inhabitants had. Was this fulfilling or desolate, lacking in human warmth? “No art here. Nothing to appease the eye...This is the way they lived: //In self-denying, plain austerity” (20). What are we to make of this guided tour commentary as it pans to the “Our lady of Sorrows” church?

Tour guide patter gives way to a series of short complete sentences. These observations have little to do with what is seen and more to do with a stark, arid, all-consuming desolation of place and thought. What makes being alive, the art, the personal effects, is absent. What is left is a utilitarian wasteland designed for wars and death. Death again appears in the guise of the “Public Executioner” who along with his family lives in exile from the rest of the town (20). The entire family, children included, are forbidden to leave their enclave as all social services are sent in (20). The isolation is complete. The bringer of death, and metaphorical descendant of the great murderous vulgar barons whose *modus operandi* was dealing in death, are denied entry to the life of the town:

Except when the father alone is called upon
 To perform his official duties. And by this means
 Everyone is kept happy; our citizens
 Need have no fear of encountering any of them,
 While they live comfortably at our expense.

(20-21)

The tour guide is a cypher for a much deeper story that goes to the heart of our refusal to deal with death and comprehend its place in our lives. We bar death, our own death, from our mind, only dealing with it on occasions of great formality such as executions.

The poem concludes as the tour guide's voice returns, recommending The Goldene Nockerl's "potato dumplings" as well as the town's "rich amber beer" (21). Food and drink are immediate gratifications, distractions from the darker images of death and violence. We have been given a guided tour of our own unwillingness to deal with death. The dissonance between the tour-bus patter and the subject matter adds to the sense that there can be no resolution and that we, as much as this fictional village, will never come to terms with death nor embrace it as part of being alive. As the guide implies, we are much better attuned to the delights of the flesh.

This chapter's poems exhibit the creation of voices and portraits which, if not completely separate, are certainly distinguishable from Hecht's personal circumstance. We have a suite of characters and stories that interrogate particular aspects of our human failings. What is constant in these dialogues is the balance between the characters, their stories, and Hecht's erudite, elegant structures and language. This dialogue itself heightens our inquiry, as readers adding dimension to the matters considered. The dialogue sets up an internal framework for considering our human failings, whether they be pride, self-deception, the corrosive nature of insubstantial ideals, narcissism, or an inability to understand death. The descriptions in the poems also never lose sight of the fact that there is someone reading them. They talk to the reader. In many of the poems, Hecht employs the metaphor of time along with variations in direct speech and commentary to bring these characters to life. This reinforces my argument that his content must be given due weight alongside his style.

Chapter Five

Anthony Hecht: The Lyrical Master

Hecht made his mark by taking an unflinching gaze into moral evil, contemplating the prospect of no redemption. Post describes *The Hard Hours* as “the crucial, indeed critical, book in his career” (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* xi). The theological dimension expressed so profoundly in that collection, and evident in his later work, demonstrates the capacity of his writing to raise issues relating to what it means to be alive today. I have already argued that he extended the way he wrote, to encompass situations beyond his own experience through imagined characters and dramatic monologues. In these characters and monologues, the dialogue or balance between the poet’s language and that of the characters contributes to investigations of narcissism, personal failure, delusion and the nature of death. I turn now to Hecht’s lyrical poems.

Johnathan Culler in *The Theory of the Lyric* describes such poems as involving a “tension between ritualistic and fictional elements – between formal elements that provide meaning and structure and serve as instructions for performance and those that work to represent character or event”(Culler 7). While this thesis does not consider theoretical aspects of the lyric form, Culler’s comments help to remind us of the essential quality of lyrical poems: their capacity to make words “sing” or perform in a memorable way.

In this chapter, I consider how substance and elegance are harmonised to realise Hecht’s voice in his lyrical poetry where, again, he challenges his readers to ask how we live and what the answers might mean. I want to consider a selection of Hecht’s lyrical poems, in particular, those in *Millions of Strange Shadows*, *The Venetian Vespers* and *The Darkness and the Light*. These poems have been chosen to map out the development of his formal style, its application and its flexibility across a variety of human situations. The question of balance mentioned by Post and Heaney is important in relation to Hecht’s lyrical work.

In reading these poems, I will pick up comments made at the conclusion of Chapter Two, when I noted the importance to his poetry of particular qualities, namely, its imaginative and dramatic, intellectual framework embedded in the imagery of light and sight. I will

argue that these qualities are founded on Hecht's debt to seventeenth-century poets, but they have been refashioned, so that this style is deployed to explore matters of substance. These poems also exhibit Hecht's abiding debt to Santayana, as the elegance of the language becomes part of the way in which the poems achieve their impact.⁶⁶ I will be adopting a close reading methodology to support my conclusions.⁶⁷ These poems deliver a powerful commentary on particular states of mind, emotions, and observations addressed directly to the reader. They all carry marked differences to his early work. Such qualities are evident in the first of the poems under consideration, "The Deodand."

Santayana's observation that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", haunts this poem (Santayana *The Life of Reason: Reason in the Common Sense* 284). Here, unlike "At the Frick", Hecht reworks contemplation, sensuality of thought and language, with a far greater and more urgent moral involvement (Hecht *Vespers* 6-8). The depiction of the North African colonial possessions as the centre of, and a metaphor for, explicitly sexual and decadent behaviour within French culture was celebrated in a series of paintings by Ingres, Delacroix, Renoir and Picasso. The French colonial mastery of Algeria and Morocco gave access to a culture that was considered forbidden and seductive. French Orientalist painting enabled painters to explicitly depict sex, violence, lassitude, and exoticism. A more open sensuality was permitted, as such representations were not of European culture, morality or sensibility. Such depictions in art persisted into the early 20th century, in the work of Matisse and Picasso. This appropriation and distortion of Islamic culture forms the background for "The Deodand", and it has dire consequences. What seems an innocent tableau, based on the Orientalist movement in French art, presages future retribution. The appropriation of this culture, however innocent, is cultural sacrilege.

Hecht places our reading within a context of both the title (a chattel that has been offered to God on the immediate occasion of someone's death as an expiatory offering) (Oxford "The Oxford English Dictionary. Vol. 4. Creel - Duzepere" 467-68) and Renoir's painting, *Parisian Women in Algerian Costume* (Hecht *Vespers* 89). Renoir's painting is itself a copy of

⁶⁶ Santayana's poetic theory was discussed in Chapter Two.

⁶⁷ The theory of lyric poetry is an extensive area of research and not the subject of this thesis, which has taken a close reading approach.

Delacroix's *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. Post has adequately considered the genealogy of the paintings discussed in this poem and displays an acute understanding of how the painterly technique informs the poem's sexual decadence (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 151-60). My concern is the poem's excoriating condemnation of colonial power set and enhanced by Hecht's style.

The poem's first section portrays French women acting out a "tableau vivant", mimicking Renoir's painting. The tone of this scene is querulous, disapproving and peppered with questions. The scene is, by its nature, transgressive both culturally and sexually, bringing with it a sense of hubris about what is yet to come. This hubris portends a more sinister quality than just the fear of being spied upon and disapproved of by some "prying *femme-de-chambre* across the boulevard":

What would their fathers, husbands, *fiancés*
 Those pillars of the old *haute-bourgeoisie*,
 Think of the strange charade now in the making?
 Swathed in exotic finery, in loose silks,
 Gauzy organzas with metallic threads,
 Intricate Arab vests, brass ornaments
 At wrist and ankle, those small sexual fetters
 Tight little silver chains, and bangled gold
 Suspended like a coarse barbarian treasure
 From soft earlobes pierced through symbolically,
 They are preparing some *tableau vivant*.

(Hecht *Vespers* 6)

To use another culture's costumes and jewellery to compose a "strange" charade is pregnant with vanity and pride. The unsettling adjectives "loose", "gauzy" and "coarse", coupled with the named objects "silks", "organzas" and "treasure", suggest what is involved in this sexual play. Additionally, the word combinations speak to that sensuous beauty referred to by Santayana where language itself is part of the poem's effect on the reader. The language's elegance compliments the subject. At some point in the future, vengeance will be exacted, as decadence has a price. The colonial mistresses are mocking Arabic culture, subverting it to their own ends and "fantasies":

What is all this but crude imperial pride,
 Feminised scented and attenuated,
 The exploitation of the primitive,
 Homages of romantic self deception,
 Mimes of submission glamorized as lust?

(Hecht *Vespers* 7)

As in the court of Marie Antoinette, when its peasant charades were swept away, the creators of this parody will be destroyed.

This is a seriously anti-colonial poem and speaks to us of very contemporary concerns.⁶⁸ The poem's political protest springs from the distortions of the cultural symbols that give people racial and national identities. The deep awareness of how colonial hegemony can suborn is at the base of this investigation, where the poem's protest strikes out against the cavalier and insensitive use of another's cultural accoutrements. This is a grave sin, much more insidious than economic or political dominance. This distortion produces, as we have seen in Hecht's earlier poem "Green", a malevolent consequence, which, over time, exacts a savage retribution for these actions:

In the final months of the Algerian war
 They captured a very young French Legionnaire.
 They shaved his head, decked him in a blonde wig,
 Carmined his lips grotesquely, fitted him out
 With long theatrical false eyelashes
 And a bright loose fitting skirt of calico,
 Cut off all of his fingers of both hands.
 He had to eat from a fork held by his captors.
 Thus costumed, he was taken from town to town,
 Encampment to encampment, on a leash,
 And forced to beg for his food with a special verse
 Sung to a popular show tune of those days.

(Hecht *Vespers* 7-8)

⁶⁸ It is not difficult, in the Australian context, to consider the fraught history of that country's colonization by European settlers.

Here, the lush decadence of the painting returns transformed into emblems of debasement and savagery. Previously, a mirror was held up so the women could arrange the scene and apply exotic makeup. Now, the mirror is not needed to depict rendered hands or to observe the grotesque shaved head and blonde wig of a teenager dressed and painted in drag. Leather thongs, which were louche emblems of forbidden sexual dalliance, are transformed into a leash and the poem's concluding song is a vicious pantomime of the women's tableau, striking at the heart of French popular culture. Revenge is delivered:

Let me be given nourishment at your hands
 Since it is for you I perform my little dance
 For I am the street-walker, Magdalen,
 And come the dawn I'll be on my way again,
 The beauty queen, Miss France.

(Hecht *Vespers* 8)

These "hands" are those of the oppressed who are now in command. The rhyming of "dance" and "France" emphasises the reversal of power in mocking the former colonial masters. "Magdalene" and "again" rhyme to highlight the fate of prostitutes and those who peddle in the culture of others. The mirror, through which we see the harem's favourite admiring the "effects" of the "shadowing of the eyes", informs the structure. This mirror marshals the succession of paintings that depict the same scene across time. The poem's double-take holds the women acting out the paintings' subjects and captures the brutal expiation that was exacted during the Algerian war, with its violent reclamation of independence and its destruction of colonial control.

For all the delicacy of the poem's ekphrastic analysis, the final observation is exacting in its retribution. To make a mockery and perform a pantomime has dire consequences. There is the sense that, for the greater purpose of condemning colonial repression, Hecht is taking a stand against the very things that often make his work an intellectual delight to read, represented here in a series of paintings of incomparable elegance and technique. The very cultured language and eloquent depictions of the *tableau vivant* in the poem, with its "Swooning lubricities and lassitudes", so redolent of Hecht's delight in elegant language and lauded by Santayana, are employed to emphasise moral corruption. Colonial power is evil

and spiritually destructive. “The Deodand” begins with a series of unsettling questions and, over time, these questions are emphatically answered. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The poem’s subject is not the tableau or even the paintings. What these both represent is an exaction of the price for stealing a people’s cultural identity. The poem links public consequences with individual action, covering a number of social and political questions. This poem has a powerful purpose and subject. If we compare this with the distanced contemplation of “At the Frick” we see a dramatic shift in the way Hecht employs Santayana’s claims for poetry to be a steady contemplation of things in their order and worth, but the elegance of the language redolent of Santayana’s discourse on poetics remains. Irony, in this case of turning the beauty of art on its head and often displayed in the poetry of Donne, is also used to great effect.⁶⁹ This poem is not distanced at all but emotionally involved in detailing the evils of colonialism, passionately engaging in spelling out the consequences.

Grierson points out that the metaphysical sensibility looks both to an individual’s experience and to the broader canvas of human destiny (Grierson xii). Just as in “The Deodand”, with its attack on colonialism, “The Cost” reflects this observation, making plain the precarious balance of lives played out on the edge, where to think of the consequences may be a two-edged sword. This personal drama is set within a broader social canvas: the unintended consequences of war.

The poem is prefaced by a quotation from *Hamlet* which refers to the catastrophic consequences of the play of Gonzago on Polonius (Shakespeare “Hamlet” 3.3). We are reminded of Hamlet’s calculated risk in revealing the truth. Again, as in “The Deodand”, every action has a cost, whether immediately realised or not. In an interview with J. D. McClatchy, Hecht expressed a certain affection for this poem: “I like it more than other people like it” (McClatchy “Hecht” 191). The poem nimbly works through the proposition that, in some circumstances, ignorance is bliss, as full knowledge of our actions and decisions may lead to disaster, both in the here and now and upon reflection:

⁶⁹ For example, in “Aire and Angels”, Donne writes: “Still when, to where thou wert, I came, // Some lovely glorious nothing I did see” (Donne *A Selection* 35).

Think how some excellent, lean torso hugs
 The brink of weight and speed,
 Coasting the margins of those rival tugs
 Down the thin path of friction,
 The athlete's dancing vectors, the spirit's need,
 And muscle's cleanly diction,

Clean as a Calder, whose interlacing ribs
 Depend on one another,
 Or a keen heeling of tackle, fluttering jibs
 And slotted centreboards,
 A fleet of breasting gulls riding the smother
 And puzzle of heaven's wards.

(Hecht *Millions* 3)

The technical mastery of the complex rhyming sestet structure is clear. A single sentence sets a cracking pace, with the opening stanza's rhymes depicting the quickness of being alive. The reader is invited to "Think" about this state of movement, both perilous and breath-taking, and be seduced by it. The sheer joy is uplifting and mercurial in effect. The following two stanzas are a one-sentence snapshot, where the imagination's grasp on the precarious speed and pulsating life of a Vespa, careening around Trajan's Column, is compressed.

Today, the base is some meters below the level of the road. Circling it requires one to lean towards the gap. The centrifugal force of turning could, if misjudged, risk toppling Vespa and passengers headlong into the pit. The energy of the action is enhanced by the description of the Vespa's duo as "lapith", so endowing them with a savage energy capable of taking on Centaurs. A reckless escapade is taking place, for being alive is what "the body knows/New risks and tilts, terrors and loves and wants, /deeply inside its clothes." (Hecht *Millions* 3). This moment is also caught in the "mind's eye", where the shadows and reality are one. The Vespa's careening loops reflect the poem's form, where its circling replicates the column's spiralling panels, depicting Trajan's Dacian wars. The scene is cinematic, detailed, factual and dramatic in depiction, full of visual detail such as "The athlete's dancing vectors".

Historically, Trajan is one of the five “good emperors” (along with Nerva, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius:

Honoured by Dante, by Gregory the Great
 Saved from eternal Hell,
 Swirled in the motes kicked up by the cough and spate
 Of the Vespa’s blue exhaust,
 And a voice whispers inwardly, “My soul,
 It is the cost, the cost.”

(Hecht *Millions* 4)

Yet in the foreground of this triumphant monument to the Dacian War, the Vespa’s “cough” and “spate” shroud the conquest. Disembodied victory fails to consider human consequences. Here, the reader cannot separate thinking from the moment, as that would be disastrous. The “blue exhaust” summons doubt, with its oblique reference to Othello’s realisation of his self-imposed crime and its subsequent “cost”. He faces Cassio, Desdemona and Iago as they “shout/Like true Venetians all,/Go screw yourself; all’s fair in love and war!” (Hecht *Millions* 4).⁷⁰

“Vespa” is a type of wasp. This might explain Hecht’s reference to Yeats’s poem “Long-Legged Fly” at the end of the tenth stanza, to emphasise that detachment from the moment would be perilous indeed. The creation of art depends on a perilous capacity to “move along silence” and ignore possibilities, as does the fly skimming across the water’s meniscus (Yeats 81). We make a “perilous purchase” to achieve this “prize of life” in ignoring the “edge of peril” (Hecht *Millions* 5). Not to do so might “bring down//The whole shebang.” (Hecht *Millions* 5). However, ignorance is not bliss for it fails to weigh up realities, both potential and real. The poem concludes with a reflection on the cost of the Dacian campaign: a fifteen-year war that brought only seven year’s peace (Hecht *Millions* 5). Whereas “The Deodand” is a scathing commentary on colonialism, here, the futility and cost of war shadow the Vespa’s life-and-death risk. The adrenaline of the moment, so well captured in the single-sentence stanzas, interlaced three- and five-foot lines and the rhyming patter,

⁷⁰ Repetition of “the cost” makes the line sing with regret and is a poetic music that is reminiscent of Santayana.

must be weighed against the column's depiction of state-condoned violence. This poem was written at the height of the Vietnam War so, again, "The Cost" contains a live, urgent and contemporary question. Two strands emerge. "Unbodied thought" can be disastrous, while living in the "here and now" brings life and joy. Thinking and reflecting on life can, however, allow for a measured response to our actions, costs and consequences. Here, Santayana's discussion of a poem being carefully thought through with each aspect layered, enhancing the central proposition, is evidently married to and enhancing of the poem's anti-war sentiments.

To read "The Cost" merely as a technical tour de force would be inadequate. This poem asks how we balance the consequences associated with visceral actions, such as combat in war, with their aftermath. The Vespa's trajectory sets up a dialogue between past and present, where the past allows for a true assaying of exciting action. The form of the poem is part of the substance of this conversation; rhyme wraps round the stanzas, as does the movement of the riders.

Similarly, "A Birthday Poem", which was published in Hecht's 1977 collection, entitled *Millions of Strange Shadows*, we see another example where he rests the poem on a metaphysical sensibility, the elements of which are mentioned by Grierson and referred to above, attaching the intellectual framework of its opening to a direct address to Helen, his second wife. This direct address is very similar to that adopted by Auden at the end of "In Praise of Limestone".⁷¹ Ashley Brown describes this as being one of Hecht's "finest achievements" and quite rightly sees the poem as one "about the act of perception" where various perspectives are interlaced (Brown 22). The poem holds, the moment in afternoon light fixing a golden dazzle of hovering midges, the use in Renaissance painting of distortion and perspective as well as the "dolly tracking"⁷² of binoculars. While it appears to be the paragon of a formal poem, it demonstrates a shift in poetic practice, incorporating intertextual elements, direct speech and a testing of the limits of form. "A Birthday Poem"

⁷¹ "The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from //Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of//Either" (Auden 415).

⁷² "Dolly tracking" is a cinematic device, whereby the camera is mounted on a small rail and is used to fluidly pan a particular room or scene.

also picks up the querulous unease reflected in “The Cost” as to whether the beauty of the moment is worthwhile or sufficient. Post’s discussion of this poem concentrates on the unfolding aspects of its “gaze” or seeing, from painting to binoculars to the photograph and finally, Hecht’s second wife, Helen, as the poem’s visual focus recalibrates from image to image. Post comments that the “grandeur” of the formal stanzaic structure

allows Hecht room to exercise at the outset his aptitude for poetic flights as a means to establish what will be the poem’s guiding axis: the difference between long and close views and the burden of meaning associated with each, and also consider... the tricky effects of perspective itself. (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 148)

Perhaps Post worries about the approach taken. He speaks about the “risk” which comes from the poem’s “elongated, cerebral, seven stanza staging of the background to highlight the shift to the immediate foreground, at which point, however, the photograph of his second wife, Helen, comes into view” (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 148).

I wish to offer a different reading that perhaps resolves the risk Post observes. The intellectual arguments of the poem are strong and redolent of those used by Donne in his love poetry, where love’s state is reasoned as well as felt: “Aire and Angels” is an example of this. These arguments lead to stanza eleven of the Hecht poem with its repetition of the collection’s title from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 53. This sonnet is a study, in part, of Platonic metaphysics with its belief that every ideal has its shadow in the real world, and we sense the ideal through those shadows. It is only with the spiritual mind, or perhaps a spiritual perspective or insight, that the true essence of things is grasped. Sonnet 53 argues that, unlike this hypothesis, the poet’s lover is the ideal incarnate.

In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato argues that poetry must be excluded from his concept of the ideal state on two grounds: it inflames the passions and it isn’t true (591c-620d). Either characteristic is sufficient to disrupt the order of a just soul, and so, despite its inherent potential for beauty, it cannot be admitted to the ideal state. Poets are banished. Moreover, in Book VII, Plato, in recording the conversation between Glaucon and Socrates, claims that we are condemned to see reality only as a series of imitations or shadows cast upon the wall of a cave as we are unable to cope with reality itself. Because of these circumstances, the people in his cave “believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those

artefacts” reflected on its wall (515c). Even if a cave dweller were able to walk towards and look up at the light that creates the shadows, he would be “pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before” (515c). Because of this, we would “turn around and flee towards the things we have been able to see” (515e).

Even if some of the cave dwellers were able to reach the surface and stare reality in the face, the sun being used as the metaphor for this, on returning to the cave they would not be greeted as seers of truth, but would rather be “ridicule[d]” (517a). Such attempts to free the cave dwellers of their shadows might lead to the seers of the sun being killed. As Eliot says in “Burnt Norton”, “humankind/Cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot *Collected* 190). Thus, according to Plato, poets merely copy an imitation of reality’s shadow, not reality itself. They are twice removed from reality. Our experience is merely an imitation of this shadow. True existence is that of ideals or ideal forms, where every ideal or form has its shadow in the material world, and we respond to these. All material things derive their shape and existence from these forms and therefore have something of the ideal in them, but it is only a severely restricted and cramped version of it. Plato also seems to suggest that poetry is a false pursuit as it fails to ground its claim of how things are and what they ought to be (530c). Poetry fails to take the next necessary step, demonstrating knowledge of the subject matter discussed.

This seems to go against how Tate and Ransom would see poetry as being a new form of knowledge, and certainly not the handmaiden of philosophy. In *The Republic*, Plato expresses unease because of the idea that poems “maim the thought of those that hear them”, therefore they do not know what they are talking about (595b). Also, poetry encourages that part of human nature that is irrational or, as he says, “awakens that part of the soul and nourishes it” (605b), as emotions cloud our capacity to distinguish truth from reality. Plato’s problem with poetry seems to stem from the fact that he is wary of imagination, emotion, discovery and artefacts that imitate something, or images that are not originals. This thesis does not pretend to explicate in any detail the conversation that springs from such a position. The thesis does, however, consider the assertion that poetry can only hope to be a tertiary representation of the truth, being a copy of an imitation.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 53, which is quoted in "A Birthday Poem", tackles this hypothesis head on. Here, the beloved seems to be almost the universal ideal, which gives true form to all substance. Whatever lovely things appears in the world, he or she outshines them all, gives them light, and informs them with herself. In this instance, form is the substance of beauty, and beauty has a human shape:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
 That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
 Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
 And you but one, can every shadow lend.
 Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
 Is poorly imitated after you;
 On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
 And you in Grecian tires are painted new:
 Speak of the spring, and foison of the year,
 The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
 The other as your bounty doth appear;
 And you in every blessed shape we know.
 In all external grace you have some part,
 But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

(Shakespeare *Complete works* 1371)

The lover claims that a "constant heart" makes "substance": a faithful love makes the difference. This ethical truth trumps the troubling Platonic division: for Shakespeare, there cannot be a separation of truth in love and the human being. The millions of shadows tend on one person. Hence the Platonic theory is reversed. Both the Shakespearean sonnet and the platonic proposition of not being able to face the truth inform Hecht's poem.

"A Birthday Poem" is in twelve sestet stanzas of iambic meter, with a constant rhyming pattern. Many first feet are anapaests, and the lines vary in length, with the predominant pentameter lines interspersed in lines two and four with dimeter and trimeter lines respectively. The effect of these structural elements shapes the way the poem is read. The anapaest feet give the lines a delicacy or lightness of touch complementary to its subject matter, with the varying lengths of lines working like the lens of a camera, zooming in and out. The strict rhyming pattern defines or frames the images like a photograph or a painting.

This rhyming pattern is indeed formal, but it is not the only dynamic at play. What also makes the poem work is its clear patterning of an argument.

The opening stanzas contemplate the movement of midges: small insects, caught *en masse* in still air, picked up by reflected sunlight. The insubstantiality, “like a little hovering ghost”, and the required refocus to capture the outline of their activity, fascinate and also reflect the “shadows” metaphor (Hecht *Millions* 21). They mark out certain perspectives with the seen “golden dazzle” of the natural world and a fascination with the “casual sleights”, that deny it any fixity. The first stanza is a mind-setting exercise and, as with many of the poems discussed in this thesis, light plays a central role as a metaphor for intellectual insight:

Like a small cloud, like a little hovering ghost
 Without substance or edges,
 Like a crowd of numbered dots in a sick child’s puzzle,
 A loose community of midges
 Sways in the carved shafts of noon that coast
 Down through the summer tree in a golden dazzle.

(Hecht *Millions* 21)

The third stanza moves from meditation to a panel of the San Zeno Altarpiece entitled *The Crucifixion*, by Mantegna, a Renaissance master of spatial illusion. The original contemplation of sight, distance and perspective in nature is now overlaid with that of the painting. This reference to the painting also considers the “blurred unfathomed background tint”, reminiscent of a Holbein portrait where the focus is fixed on the subject. The fifth stanza concludes with reference to the Flemish school and in particular Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s works, such as “Netherlandish Proverbs”, where perspective is bifocal, with “dwarf pilgrims” and “shrunk cows” and, in that sense, unnatural (Hecht *Millions* 21). The Flemish school is also known for its “layering effect” where the paint was applied in a sequence, building up the egg-oil emulsion with layers of oil glazes in primary colours.

The poem’s progressive cerebral layering uses these artistic techniques as reference points. Hecht builds a series of contemplative images of light around time, perspective and focus. The process is intellectually seductive and emotionally engaging. These paintings reflect our

view of humanity. Mantegna's concerns are about that "mid- afternoon of our disgrace" (Hecht *Millions* 21) while Breughel's concerns reflect on the human follies of his society. Both painters comment on a seeing of human life beyond self. Stanza six expands this contemplation and picks up the sense of perspective in time, "Looked at *sub specie/Aeternitatis*" (Hecht *Millions* 22). From Spinoza onwards, this Latin expression came to describe what might be considered universally and eternally true, without any reference to, or dependence upon, the merely temporal dimension of reality. The implication is that what we humans do, day-to-day or even over a lifetime, may be meaningless. Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* writes: "The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics" (Wittgenstein 83). The poem's images are given an added biblical perspective with a reference to the mountain top on which Noah's Ark came to rest after the great flood: "from/The snow-line of some Ararat of years," (Hecht *Millions* 22). Hecht, though, seems to object to this. For neither human emotion nor the broad sweep of human history, when considered from the vanishing point of infinity, has significance. Thinking and philosophical conjecture have their limits. The image of "Zeiss binoculars", an SS-issued ordinance and an instrument of cold objectivity used in situations of great human anguish, makes this point (Hecht *Millions* 22).

The eighth stanza's opening pentameter line slows the movement, halts thought and brings the focus back to the present. The here and now has immediacy and power to pull memory and present emotion together:

It's when we come to shift the gears of tense
 That suddenly we note
 A curious excitement of the heart
 A slight catch in the throat:-
 When for example, from the confluence
 That bears all things away I set apart

The inexpressible lineaments of your face,

(Hecht *Millions* 22)

These stanzas balance the discovery of a photo and the immediacy of its emotional impact, “A curious excitement of the heart/And slight catch in the throat”, with the capacity for language to marry past and present. This is a Proustian moment, where powerful emotions are generated by the rediscovery of a child’s past, captured in a photo: “That bears all things away I set apart//The inexpressible lineaments of your face”. The discovery recalls the previous thoughts on perspective, “lineaments” echoing the fine detail of Flemish and early Renaissance painting. All these elements are brought together by the iambic structure which accelerates in the second line, reflecting this emotional quickening. The speaker is demonstrably involved.

The poem has progressed from thought to palpable engagement. The poem’s opening contemplation frames the latter. There is not just a shift of gears from past to present; this is more akin to a montage device as used in film. Moreover, the use of colon and dash appears to accentuate the moment. There is no piling on of detail, either. The clash of past and present thought and feeling are heightened. The language is spare and direct, dispensing with the erudite and ornate vocabulary of the previous stanzas. Stanza ten begins with a direct address to his wife where the personal emotion of discovery, on seeing a painting and finding the photo, is transferred to the subject as she looks at her new shoes with “pride and admiration, half/Wonder and half joy, at the right and left” (Hecht *Millions* 22).

The physical movement of the subject’s eye picks up the movement in shifting perspectives, examined before. All of the poem’s elements—image, metre, the careful philosophical underpinnings, the anchoring of the thinking in nature and culture—work together to create an immediate emotionally charged moment. What is new, and enhances the impact of this moment, is the unadorned clarity of the observation. As befits the conservative Hecht, this is not an iconoclastic shift, but it is a difference of degree, a personal adumbration on the poetry of cool intelligence. The final stanzas take this a step further:

The picture is black and white, mere light and shade.
 Even the sneakers’ red
 Has washed away in acids. A voice is spent,
 Echoing down the ages in my head:
 *“What is your substance, whereof are you made,
 What millions of strange shadows on you tend?”*

O my most dear, I know the live imprint
 Of that smile of gratitude,
 Know it more perfectly than any book.
 It brims upon the world, a mood
 Of love, a mode of gladness without stint.
 O that I may be worthy of that look.

(Hecht *Millions* 23)

Here, the lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 52 are used and it is in the "shadows" of the photo that we see unalloyed love and joy. What is clear in the present gaze is the power to elicit a desire to be "worthy", to contract time, thought and feeling, into the here and now which abolishes Plato's shadows. The final stanza is a direct address to the poet's wife where neither intellectual analogy nor intertextual references are employed as cyphers. A "smile" is understood better than a "book". The final stanza is again in direct and pared-down speech. The elegance of the Shakespeare and the reference to Plato are set alongside the directness of the last lines, and the stanzas themselves are moving from one style of address to another. People matter to Hecht, and for him, they are real.

The immediacy of emotions, untethered from learning, is couched or combined with a constant rhyming pattern. This combination reflects Hecht's move away from his early style to, as Perkins would say, a more "casual and immediate way of writing" (Perkins 382). This poem is one of the markers in Hecht's development from apprentice to a poet confident in his own position. The poem also questions the Platonic ideal so loved by Santayana. Here, passion breaks through thought and is given full reign. The declaration is passionate, dramatic and without hesitation. Again, though, Hecht has harnessed his debt to the seventeenth-century poets and their love of intellectual argument to frame the substance of this poem's emotional conclusion.

Hecht turns to Aristotle to reinforce his distance from the Platonic ideal in the next poem for consideration, "Peripeteia". This is the Aristotelian term used to describe the significant turning point for a major character or plot in a play and signifies the centre of this poem's subject. The poem's setting is a theatre outing, to see a Shakespearean play, and its title flags the poem's turn towards an imaginative world, away from the "Foul breathed, gum

chewing, fat with arrogance” theatre audience (Hecht *Millions* 36). The poem’s debt to *A Winter’s Tale* and Shakespeare is the subject of a discussion by Post, who notes that the poem’s structure corresponds to the usual five acts of a Shakespearean play and speaks of its dramatic qualities as being crucial to many of Hecht’s monologues (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 189). I would want to add to this observed Shakespearean genealogy.

In a letter to Norman German, Hecht said that the poem concerned meeting his second wife (German 153). Perhaps, this reading, too, can be expanded. With its complex stanzas the poem is fashioned like a Cowleyan ode. Hecht is well aware of the artificial nature of the occasion. His hair is “mussed from behind by a grand gesture of mink” and, upon a perfunctory glance at fellow audience members and program, his eyes rise, tongue in cheek and “prayer like”, to the emblems of “high art” offering less than perfection in representation: “Two bulbs are missing and Apollo’s bored” (Hecht *Millions* 36). The pretensions of the occasion are gently mocked: yes, we are at the theatre, but let’s not be too serious. The attention to the detailed observations of crowd and movement between the narrator’s internal musings and the external observations are quick, witty and sharp.

Having established the strophic turn, both in place and thought, the second stanza takes a counter turn. This stanza dwells on that moment of hushed “stillness” between lights dimming and a curtain rising:

But in that instant, which the mind protracts,
From dim to dark before the curtain rises,
Each of us is miraculously alone
In calm, invulnerable isolation,
Neither a neighbour nor a fellow but,
As the beginning and end, a single soul,
With all the sweet and sour of loneliness.

(Hecht *Millions* 36)

The movement between the crowd full of “passion” or “opinion” and the suspended self in the “dusk” repeats the movement between observation and thinking of the first stanza. But imagination here is given greater flight, reflecting on a “loneliness” that surrounds birth,

death and a child, as was the case in *The Tempest* (Hecht *Millions* 36). Imagination has great possibilities and leads to observations about Hecht's profession:

A useful discipline, perhaps. One that might lead
To solitary, self denying work
That issues in something harmless, like a poem,
Governed by laws that stand for other laws,
Both of which aim, through kindred disciplines,
At the soul's knowledge and habiliment.

(Hecht *Millions* 37)

The reference to Auden, both in the description of poetry as "harmless" and in the theological matters raised by "The Hidden Law", speaks to Hecht's own writing (Hecht *Hidden Law* 197, 209). The final couplet maps out the proposition that the "disciplines" of writing can contribute to our understanding, as suggested by Horace in his advice to poets (quoted in my introduction). Hecht's thinking on poetry turns to the Cartesian concept of the mind, where existence is defined by the mind's ability to know "regent of itself" and can revel "In consciousness of consciousness, alone" (Hecht *Millions* 37). As the play begins, imagination and his dreams are given full scope.

They merge, as a whirl of possible Shakespearean characters appear and disappear. Hecht is aware of his own cerebral conversation around these characters. The poem is light, playful and humorous: "Who is she? Sylvia? Amelia Earhart?" (Hecht *Millions* 37), with elevated thinking referring to Shakespeare's "Sylvia" grounded in the reference to Amelia Earhart, a famous pilot who disappeared at sea. The final stanza enacts a return with new insight as actors, play and imagination combine:

Miraculous Miranda, steps from the stage,
Moves up the isle to my seat, where she stops,
Smiles gently, seriously, and takes my hand
And leads me out of the theatre, into a night
As luminous as noon, more deeply real,
Simply because of her hand, than any dream
Shakespeare or I or anyone ever dreamed.

(Hecht *Millions* 38)

Is “seriously” directed to the reader or does it describe Miranda’s demeanour? Perhaps, given the explicit and distanced awareness of previous observations, there is a bit of both. Imagination is an integral part of living, not just for the vocation of a poet, but in its capacity to transform the way we see the world. His imagination takes flight, anchored to the poem’s acute visual observations.

“Peripeteia” features a dramatic exposition, both in its setting and structure, of imagination’s power. We cannot always be jaundiced, as the “night” is a “brave new world” which is more “deeply real”. Imagination makes it so (Hecht *Millions* 38). The poem moves through a series of turns or perspectives in which Hecht’s internal dialogue, observations and thinking, are recorded. Here in the theatre, imagination and dreaming are juxtaposed with the vocation of writing and are seen as essential to being alive. All of these elements are brought together in the final stanza. It is Hecht’s Miranda (“her hand”) who creates new life and she, an imagined being, has a real emotional impact on him, transforming his world through the drama on stage. Thought and feeling work like a double helix through the stanzas, reminiscent of Eliot’s discussion of the poetry of Donne and Herbert (Eliot “Metaphysical” 285).

In *The Hidden Law*, Hecht observed how life and time altered Auden’s poetic approach, and that his own attitudes had also changed (Hecht *Hidden Law* ix). He adds, though, that what remained a constant is the endorsement of Valéry’s declaration: “I like those lovers of poetry who venerate the goddess with too much lucidity to dedicate to her the slackness of their thought and the relaxation of their reason” (Hecht *Hidden Law* ix). Hecht is firm in his belief that poetics demands active thinking. This thinking is at the heart of Hecht’s work just, as he claims, it is central to Auden’s (x).

Hecht’s final collection, *The Darkness and the Light*, further demonstrates the claims made about his poetry being a sustained meditative exercise, both intellectually and emotionally: on being human. This collection also contains poems that show how Hecht has wholeheartedly deployed intertextual references to enhance a poem’s reading. The lyrical poems in it are framed with care. These poems are expressed not only through, at times, pared-down structures, but with a passionate, involved argument. Poetics of this kind,

where the argument is material to the poem's emotional dynamic, reflect Herbert as much as Donne, as I will demonstrate below.

At the end of this collection, a note references the typeface created by Justus Walbaum. The note refers, *inter alia*, to the fact that "although the type that bears his name may be classified as modern, numerous slight irregularities in its cut give this face its humane manner" (Hecht *Darkness* 68). For Hecht, every detail matters and his human concerns remain embedded in them (Hecht *in Conversation with Hoy* 32). The collection works through aspects of seeing, understanding or perhaps contemplation, with the metaphor of light and dark given full play in the context of human "irregularities". The collection's title, which has been taken from Psalm 139:12, demands that God accepts our complete nature. Here is a meditation on the cycle of living and death in God's sight, held, in an all-encompassing image of light.

The first poem I want to consider, "A Fall", shows how far Hecht has embraced intertextuality. In this poem, light, sight, infinite understanding and knowledge are one and the same. The poem also contains a very clear intertextual reference to William Wordsworth's "The Simplicon Pass" (Wordsworth 149).

Hecht's poem opens with a contemplation of "your average Alp":

Those desolate, brute, chilling sublimities,
Unchanging but as the light may chance to fall,
Deserts of snow, forlorn barrens of rock,
What could be more indifferent to man's life
Than your average Alp ...

(Hecht *Darkness* 15)

The voice is both contemplative and alert. The lines employ, with variations, an iambic pentameter and they address the reader quite directly as part of a conversation. The word "sublimities" appears at the end of the first line, and comes after a series of adjectives where the mountain's grandeur in its sensuous sound, also has a sense of constriction. The reader encounters a series of short, sharp, definite places, reinforced by words such as "unchanging", "deserts", and "barrens". The indifference of the mountain to "man's life" reminds one of that experienced by Yeats in the opening lines of "Man and the Echo", and

of the “types and symbols of eternity” in Wordsworth (Yeats 93; Wordsworth 150). More interestingly, in “The Simplon Pass”, we have Wordsworth’s lines “the darkness and the light// Were all like workings of one mind...”, which is an anticipation of this collection’s title (Wordsworth 150). Post also comments on this poem’s indebtedness to Byron. I suggest, however, that its similarities to Wordsworth’s “Simplon Pass” are more important (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 254).

In the phrase “your average Alp”, there is the whiff of “Hanna-Barbera” humour. Barbera cartoons (which include *The Flintstones*) are known for their unsophisticated but energetic two-dimensional style. Certainly, the richness of the poem’s opening lines, with their polysyllabic adjectives, is brought down to earth in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. What this reference does, like the collection’s typeface, is “humanise”, and points to a rich interweaving of intertextual references. We also have a comparison between heightened and colloquial speech, mirroring the majestic profile of the Alps and the stark drawing style of the cartoon. The ascent and descent coupled with its revelation also provide a cinematic and dramatic quality.

What follows this shift is a series of nouns and verbs that reinforce the cold, clear indifference of the mountain. The language conveys a sense of “black and white”: mountains do not contain humanity, and this is uncomfortable to contemplate. Perhaps the only way to do so is with a little derisive humour.

The humour continues but is directed at the Swiss: their allegedly kill-joy religion, indulgence in tautologous technology, lack of cuisine, and suspect financial behaviour. This summation, in lines eight to ten of the poem, resembles the well-known comments by Orson Welles in *The Third Man* (1949). The inhabitants are impervious to the joys of being alive and have contributed little to being human. These observations are a too easy a set of generalisations, but they do reflect the poem’s initial depiction of the landscape as austere.

The following section works through the terrain’s greater significance. The darkness all but overwhelms the valley at dawn and dusk. Now, a gentler litany of objects makes up the scene, all connected to the inhabitants through the possessive pronoun “their” (Hecht *Darkness* 15). The image of water is used to describe the landscape and the effect that the truncated day has on it. The valley descends into “sinks and pools of dark”, and sunrise

brings on smells that “rinse the air” where, even at midday, the “outdoors still glistens with night dew” (Hecht *Darkness* 15). Long nights and short days lead to a narrowness of mind, eliciting “dark misgivings” for the narrator about going beyond the valley up onto the ridge to see the view:

And suddenly, at a narrowing of the path,
The whole earth fell away, and dizzily
I beheld the most majestic torrent in Europe,
A pure cascade, over six hundred feet,
Falling straight down – it was like Rapunzel’s hair,
But white, as if old age and disappointment
Had left her bereft of suitors. Down it plunged,
Its great continuous, unending weight
Toppling from above in a long shaft
Or cavern stem that broke up at its base
Into enormous rhododendron blooms
Of spray, a dense array of shaken blossoms.

(Hecht *Darkness* 16)

Before continuing, it is important to demonstrate just how similar Hecht’s poem is to Wordsworth’s. Below is the final section of “The Simplon Pass”:

Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside,
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

(Wordsworth 150)

The comparison reveals a consistent intertextual referencing. Hecht has moved on from what was criticised in his poetry as the use of unanchored, erudite, cosmopolitan references, to an integration of them within the poem’s dynamic. The title for his collection, the allusion to the theological contemplation of the infinite as well as the use of the image of flowers, ricochets between the poems. Here, though, unlike the “black drizzling crags” of

Wordsworth, Hecht's lines are filled with light and revelation. After the images of dark shadows, both physical and mental, these images are dramatic and breath-taking. Height is now an expansive dimension and early images of water as "sinks" and "pools" become a torrent. The waterfall appears a vision of considerable majesty. The Rapunzel image suggests the wistfulness and age of the fall; there is the hint of the German/Swiss dimension in referring to the Brothers Grimm folk tale. "Precision watches" and the "sobrieties of Calvin" make way for the gorgeousness of the rhododendron flower. From the cramped vision of the poem's beginning, we now have an expansive spectacle that brings on vertigo.

This dramatic metaphorical movement plays through the darkness to light. The scene is indeed "awesome". The sinuous sound of the lines, "Its great, continuous, unending weight/Toppling from above in a long shaft"; the rich language of "Rapunzel" and "rhododendron" and the use of "a view" to see both physically and spiritually are crafted beautifully. Darkness and light are presented in a metaphysical sense, where the movement from valley to mountain top is worked by language that moves with a compelling metre: "I beheld the most majestic torrent in Europe". No longer do we consider the Swiss to be provincial.

The poem concludes with a return to the valley at night. The "Baedeker" image deftly reasserts the limited and comfortable way to sightsee when abroad. The final four lines compare the majestic vision of the fall with the limited human response, as we return to a vulgar designation of your average Alp. This is a poem where the subject matter —nature reflecting "Eternity"—is taken from the sonority of the Wordsworth poem and is recast with all the colloquial power of popular culture, whether in fairy tale or cartoon.

Five other poems in his final collection round off the journey Hecht has undertaken as a lyrical poet, reworking his debt to poets of the seventeenth century. They are reminders also, of his abiding interest in the place of humanity in a larger universe, dramatically imagined where visual images are at the centre of the works. Kierkegaard's "living forward and understanding backward" springs to mind when one reads them (Kierkegaard *Papers* 161). The simplicity of the pared-down language in many cases, but with deceptively complex structures, the balance between substance and elegant structures remains. In a letter to Ashley Brown, Hecht makes the following comment:

You are right, I think, in your feeling of the modern importance of Herbert to many poets, critics and readers, and you sense that he has edged out Donne in our esteem. They are of course not easily comparable, and lumping them together under the rubric of “metaphysical” does not make them so. There is often something boyish, show-offy, sometimes even strident and ostentatious in Donne...which contrasts markedly with the eloquent unposturing reserve of Herbert. (Hecht *Letters* 171)

Again, in Hecht’s preface to *The Essential Herbert*, he speaks glowingly of a Herbert’s poem seeming “to find, discover or invent its own form and these forms tend often to be unusually demanding” (9). The poems below reflect Hecht’s journey from “*At The Frick*”, much influenced by Donne, to the “eloquent unposturing reserve” of Herbert. A triptych of definitions strung together by light and an unwavering gaze is presented in “*Despair*”:

Sadness. The moist gray shawls of drifting sea-fog
 Salting scrub pine, drenching the cranberry bogs,
 Erasing all but foreground, making a ghost
 Of anyone who walks softly away;
 And the faint penitent psalmody of the ocean.

Gloom. It appears among the winter mountains
 On rainy days. Or the tiled walls of the subway
 In caged and aging light, in the steel scream
 And echoing vault of the departing train,
 The vacant platform, the yellow destitute silence.

But despair is another matter. Midafternoon
 Washes the worn bank of a dry arroyo,
 Its ocher crevices, unrelieved rusts,
 Where a startled lizard pauses, nervous, exposed
 To the full glare of relentless marigold sunshine.

(Hecht *Darkness* 24)

Compare this to “The place of Pain in the Universe”, with which I opened this thesis. Both approach subjects of abject depression that can, if they overwhelm us, lead to a very deep pessimism about the nature of life. But whereas the earlier poem is didactic in approach, replete with the appropriate cultural references, this poem moves from a grey setting, towards a series of emotionally charged images of light, compelling the reader into the

centre of the propositions defining the three defined states. Homage is paid to his metaphysical foundations, with “heterogeneous ideas” being “yoked by violence together” when, in the third stanza the image of light, so often associated with hope, is employed to emphasise the unremitting nature of despair, that “startles” us (Hecht *Summoning* 15).⁷³ Whereas the image of pain in the earlier poem is strung across the three stanzas by argument and proposition, here we see colour employed to elevate an emotional perception of sadness, gloom and despair. These are emotional snapshots where colour and light offer a rich emotional understanding that transcends logic or argument. The first stanza’s “sea-fog” blurs vision and with, a series of present participle transitive verbs, “salting”, “erasing”, “drenching” and “making”, describe the consequences of its active presence. Life is drained out of both nature and the reader as the images of colour and definition are slowly washed away. The subsequent lack of definition captures the tristesse that lingers in and is the emotional heart of despair. Sensory images (and not logic) carry the poem. People, though, still exist, even if just as ghosts of their former selves.

The second stanza turns to “Gloom”. Rather than a series of verbs driving the stanza here, there are a series of camera like snapshots, one piled on another creating a collage of impressions depicting this emotional state. Here, rather than the encroaching shadows of fog, light and sound make an appearance, with a subway’s “caged and aging light” and the “yellow destitute silence” of the subway’s platform as the “steel scream” of the departing train echoes through the tunnel. Again, gloom is defined within an echo of humanity, the departing train carries life away with it. This stanza conjures up a sense of the human loneliness captured in the paintings of Edward Hopper.⁷⁴

The final stanza begins with a matter-of-fact statement demanding no disagreement. Despair is very different from either sadness or gloom. Despair contains little reflection of life. On the other hand, despair contains the brightest of lights: a “relentless marigold sunshine”. If in the first stanza definition has been washed away, then here there is

⁷³ This conjunction also reflects the title of the collection in which this poem was published.

⁷⁴ See, in particular, Hopper’s painting *Nighthawks* (1942).

nowhere to hide, no relief from the stark and barren landscape where we and the lizard are exposed to a world without life. The lizard is the only living thing in the poem making despair more acute. Whereas the second stanza is a series of picture-grabs, here the eye's camera pans across a single shot. The counterintuitive coupling of light with despair only sharpens our understanding of despair's impact in denying hope to life. The poem's emotional chiaroscuro works through the movement from shade to light, driven by images that become connected in the third stanza.

There is an unadorned elegance, an "unposturing reserve" in fact, to these stanzas which enhances the impact of their content. Intellectual argument is left behind, replaced by powerful images of light and sight which capture the poem's interrogation of these emotional states. Light, or the absence of it, also informs the next poem I wish to discuss.

"The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee" is a three-stanza meditation on our lives seen again *sub specie eternitatis*. I have already discussed this philosophical concept. For Christians, this phrase equates to an interpretation of time in terms of eternity and also of human events in the light of divine revelation. So, given the poem's title, it would be a contrarian reading not to accept that Hecht was working through the text with a Christian underpinning, as enunciated in Psalm 139:12. Post is glowing in his praise for this poem, claiming that it is "classical in its purity of diction, elemental in its rhymes, plush with imagery, spare in design" (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 277). With all of this, I agree. The poem also has a calm, meditative voice that explores what it might mean for us to approach death from a theological perspective:

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 have lasted through the night,
 Cold brows and silent lips,
 For whom the rising light
 Entails their own eclipse,
 Brightening as they fail.

(Hecht *Darkness* 65)

This is elegant, simple and profound. Each stanza's first and last lines are bound within that moment of sunset, the time when light and dark meet. The rhyming of "trees"/ "lees" and "day"/ "gray" continues the contrast and make the transition between day and night palpable. The final line's metre gives an assured, calm acquiescence to the scheme of things. Light at dusk is described visually as "trailing silks", with the day draining away and the dark rising up. As we have seen, it is a signature of many Hecht poems that he asks for a moment of reflection at the beginning. Here the light, while fading, "hangs" in the trees momentarily but in that pause describes the complete solar system's movement in the sunset. We have a view both of the quotidian and the universal. However, if one form of light departs, life continues. Sunlight is replaced in the "plushest darks" with spots of light, a witness to continuing human activity; "scattered" and random in their appearance, but "set" within the night. Life goes on, it would appear, irrespective of night or day. This belief in life as a constant is only interrupted with returning daylight. It is the new light that extinguishes life, and our assumption of life being associated with light is turned on its head.

The final stanza heralds dawn and with it, fades the signs of life visible in the lights at night. With dawn comes the inevitability of death, or as Donne says, "everlasting night" (Donne 194). Whereas in the first stanza, the encroaching darkness of night revealed life, in the final stanza it is dawn's light that is the eternal extinguisher of life. With our natural logic reversed, both life cycle and cosmic, divine cycle are complete. These cycles are at the

centre of this meditation. God is the eternal, and there is no difference between night and day from his perspective; they are one and the same. One sentence runs from the second line of the second stanza to the poem's conclusion. The arc of the argument for a divine presence is captured in it, where God is an eternal presence outside of time. In its metric structure, the final stanza has a calm acceptance of both the eternal and death. This stanza presents a peaceful acquiescence which is diametrically opposed to that of Dylan Thomas, who urged his father to rage against the dying of the light (Thomas 148). As Post asks of this poem, is it the elderly or the light that fails or brightens at the poem's end (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* 278)?

Theologically, does it really matter? The images are of light and sight, revolving around the central movement of light and darkness. Light has the metaphor of "silks" and is described as sparks of fire, whereas night, in contrast, is associated with peat where the dark is plush; an adjective often used to describe cushions and furniture. The rhetorical argument of the seventeenth-century poets has been displaced by an emphasis on the visual description to carry the poem's theological contemplation.

This peace is also present in Hecht's final poems on love and old age. Much has been made (as previously discussed in Chapter Two) of his use of complex language, but in these the language is, while rich, clear and simple. "Late Afternoon: The Onslaught of Love" and "Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy –Seven" are the two I want to consider. Both poems are full of joy and intense emotion. In the first of these, the light at sunset and the sounds of dusk wash through the first stanza, capturing a serene moment:

At this time of day
 One could hear the caulking irons sound
 Against the hulls of the dockyard.
 Tar smoke rose between trees
 And large oily patches floated on the water,
 Undulating unevenly
 In the purple sunlight
 Like the surfaces of Florentine bronze.

(*Darkness* 3)

The lines are metrically uneven as is the movement of the water, and the anapest in the first, third, seventh and eighth lines creates the sound of lapping waves in the harbour. Also prominent are images of stillness: “caulking irons sound”, “Tar smoke rose between trees”, “oily patches float”. There is not a breath of wind, and the effect is to focus the reading or reader to a moment in time, “At this time of day”, which is repeated at the beginning of the first, second and final stanzas. The repetition has a calming effect, like waves lapping.

The stanza’s beginning refers to time in the natural diurnal cycle and is book-ended with “Florentine bronze”. Hecht speaks of both natural and created beauty, with the images of both melding happiness with tranquillity. The second stanza begins with the same line:

At this time of day
 Sounds carried clearly
 Through hot silences and fading daylight.
 The weedy fields lay drowned
 In odors of creosote and salt.
 Richer than double colored taffeta,
 Oil floated in the harbor,
 Amoeboid, iridescent, limp.
 It called to mind the slender limbs
 Of Donatello’s *David*.

(Hecht *Darkness* 3)

This combination of the harbour’s natural world and the cultural references is now heightened. We have more than observation; we have an emotional engagement, where the fields are “drowned”, smells are richer than “doubled colored taffeta”, and the oil is alive and changing in shape and sheen. A reference to Donatello’s *David* concludes the stanza— a bronze known for its particularly ambiguous, erotic appearance. This specific cultural reference complements the emotionally heightened perception of nature and lends an added patina to its beauty. The second stanza mirrors the first in structure and offers two separate perspectives on the same scene, having the same cultural reference point. Where the first stanza describes, the second interprets a present state of mind and being. The

words capture an emotional engagement in the second stanza, heightening the reader's perceptions, offering sight, mind and feeling. The third stanza combines the two in its opening line:

It was lovely and she was in love.
 They had taken a covered boat to one of the islands.
 The city sounds were faint in the distance:
 Rattling of carriages, tumult of voices,
 Yelping of dogs on the decks of the barges.

(Hecht *Darkness* 3)

The first line compacts the first and second stanzas' understanding of place and the lover's state of mind: "It", followed by "she", couples the two. Light connects the oil's watery sheen with the bronze's recalled hue as love envelops and blocks out worldly distractions. Travelling to the island is as much a state of consciousness as it is a physical journey:

At this time of day
 Sunlight empurpled the world.
 The poplars darkened in ranks
 Like imperial servants.
 Water lapped and lisped
 In its native and quiet tongue.
 Oakum was in the air and the scent of grasses.
 There would be fried smelts and cherries and cream.
 Nothing designed by Italian artisans
 Would match this evening's perfection.
 The puddled oil was a miracle of colors.

(Hecht *Darkness* 4)

The refrain line of the first two stanzas is echoed, but this time there is no separation between the reader and nature. Love emboldens and reshapes the natural world to the lover's ecstatic moment. The poplars are imperial servants and water has language where love makes nature sing, surpassing the artifice of art. Sheer enjoyment in the moment, unsullied by doubt, describes the lyric's sentiment. The poem has the affirmation and confident arrogance of Donne's "The Sun Rising": no art can match this moment's perfection and nature has undergone a metamorphosis that bows to the emotional thrall of the lovers (Donne 6). But it also has Herbert's quiet confidence and sophisticated formal

structures. Such a state is a “miracle of colors”. The lacing together of the visual images is striking, as they carry the ebb and flow of being in love. Whereas argument had been a hallmark of Hecht’s earlier poems, here visual images are held within the lines, making the poem emotionally compelling, particularly in the last line above.

I want to couple this with the poem “Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy –Seven”, which is prefaced with a quotation from George Herbert’s “The Forerunners” — again, a deliberate framing of the poem’s content:

The harbingers are come. See, see their mark:
 White is their color, and behold my head.
 But must they have my brain? Must they dispart
 Those sparkling notions, which therein were bred?
 Must dullness turn me to a clod?
 Yet have they left me, *Thou art still my God.*

(Herbert *English Works* 166)

Herbert’s first stanza presaged the decrepitude of encroaching old age and in particular, the accompanying mental decline. Hecht begins comparing a decline in physical and mental alertness with smouldering autumn leaves:

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 cinereous 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.

(Hecht *Darkness* 63)

The speech stress of the first line mimics the movement of a sarabande with the hyphenated “smoke-and-pepper childhood”. The formal metre’s rhyming patterns also echo Gray’s “Elegy Written In A Country Church Yard” and there is an air of resignation as Hecht remembers the smoking leaves of late autumn signalling the end of past years. The ravages of old age on the poet are gently, but, without rancour, mocked in the second stanza. Decay is physical, but in death it is recognised as the patina of experience and memory, not all of which is pleasant; for “shames” and “tribulations” can be only acknowledged perhaps when one grows old. The “flames” that destroy our youth also produce “smoke” as conciliation for these wrongdoings.

The second, third and fourth stanzas are all part of one sentence, capturing a forgiving fire, our past failings, and a resignation to our ever-increasing forgetfulness. Old age greys the mind and blurs the sharpness of memory but it has the palliative quality of forgiveness. In the three central stanzas are four aspects of ageing: physical decay, regret, memory, and guilt for past wrong actions. However, physical decline or the onset of dementia also offer a sort of peace.

The final stanza returns to the dance in the title, with the first line’s speech rhythms and the “quarter-turn” mimicking a sarabande dance. Time’s movement and advancing age are a dance leading to life’s conclusion. I find this last stanza compelling in its unadorned structure and sheer grace. There is nothing angry about this poem; rather, it is a clear-sighted acceptance of the way things are. This poetry is unlike anything that Hecht has

written before. While the formality remains, the rigour in its application seems quite natural. Nor is there some profound underlying pressure or dread about death. Death is not at all to be feared, but is rather to be accepted as inevitable. There is no anxiety.

What, then, do we make of the poems discussed in this chapter? Hecht endorses C. S. Lewis's comments about the Scottish poet Dunbar: "All his effects are calculated and nearly all are successful" (Hecht *Poetic Art* xv-xvi). Thinking in these poems, though, is not just expressed in their formal structure. These poems demonstrate calculated effects in their composition, formal prosodic structures remaining part of his repertoire, but he broadens his palette, particularly when compared to his early poems. In these poems, for example, the images of light, the dance movements of the sarabande, all play their part. Time and experience did alter how Hecht approached his own writing. Certainly, personal experience, as well as an active involvement in writing about his craft, through his critical works as he says in the preface of *Melodies Unheard*, had an impact.

What began in "At The Frick", with Hecht's studied considerations on the moment of death providing clarity, continued in a richer way through many of his later lyrical poems. An engagement with what are essentially the qualities found in the lyrics of Donne and Herbert, argument, irony and elegant language, is harnessed to a broad human canvas.⁷⁵ These qualities are, at times, expressed in a more relaxed style.

What is also striking about these poems is the imagery of light and sight. "The Deodand" uses the paintings of Ingres and Delacroix to frame its commentary on colonialism. The double-edged moral of "The Cost" is heralded by the Vespa's blue exhaust. Light joins both bronze and oil in a sheen of colour in "Late Afternoon: The Onslaught of Love". "Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy –Seven" moves graciously through hues of grey, smoke and flame towards its final elegantly-metred stanza. The shock of the dizzying cascading waterfall in "A Fall" is signalled by the stark arresting contrast of light and dark on either side of the valley. In "Peripetia" the fading chandelier lights usher in "The Tempest" with its

⁷⁵ Hecht makes the point in the letter I quote above that while Herbert and Donne are often called metaphysical poets, their writing style is quite different to each other's (*Letters* 171).

transformative power. Sight and different perspectives of seeing drive “A Birthday Poem” through each of its stanzas.

We find in all of them Hecht’s signature opening of an intellectual framework, now married to compelling emotional moments. Taken as a whole, these late poems all have a striking capacity to engage the reader in their content and their structure, exploring aspects of how we live and die.

Hecht’s lyrical poetry embodies his own assessment that this genre comprises “manifold uses and devices of poetic music – the interweaving of assonance and dissonance, the complications of meter and stanzaic form, the echoic effects of repetitions as well as allusions to musical effects both within the context of the individual poem and to earlier works” (Hecht *Poetic Art* 60). That is to say that the structural component of his poetry continues, in balance with each poem’s subjects, to inform his work. What he does not say is that his work employs this “music” with an understanding of life.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Anthony Hecht: more than “eloquence of speech.”

At the end of *Melodies Unheard* Hecht writes: “Great works of poetry continue to yield a new sense of themselves, and prove to our delight and our astonishment, utterly inexhaustible” (Hecht *Melodies* 299). The same can be said of his own work.

This thesis begins by mapping out the foundational influences on his writing style, tracing his own development of them within his work. Hecht’s early work demonstrates a remarkable command of the technical disciplines required in writing formal poetry. This facility in shaping language is well demonstrated in such poems as “The Place of Pain in the Universe”, “Samuel Sewell”, “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este” and “At the Frick”. All of which I have considered in detail in Chapters One and Two. I then set out to test the following question: can Hecht’s style achieve a balance between elegance in language and substance in content?

The thesis takes three aspects of his writing to demonstrate how this style is harnessed to produce poetry of considerable depth and contemporary importance. I have taken up Post’s invitation, in his recent study, to explore the connection between Hecht’s rhetorical skills and their application to serious issues identified by him as not yet fully investigated (Post *A Thickness of Particulars* xii). This thesis goes some way to addressing this.

This investigation has shown that Hecht, despite suggestions to the contrary by some, is a poet of considerable depth, whose work continues to shed fresh insight into our human experiences. He has taken his poetic heritage and refashioned it to tackle pertinent questions for a world that often seems to have no easy answers or certainty. He gets the balance right between a formal style of writing poetry and maintaining an immediate, dramatic involvement: engaging the reader in the human experiences he explores.

I have sought to demonstrate that Hecht's engagement with our human experience is achieved, in part, through his natural command of stanzaic and rhyming structures, the eloquence of his language, and his erudite references to western culture, art and history. These gifts have been lauded by many and are the prism through which his work has been approached and commented upon. Dazzling as they are, these characteristics, though, are at the service of several important social and personal investigations that encompass how we live. I have focussed my thesis upon exploring particular topics in depth in order to understand Hecht's contribution to American poetry and how it is achieved. In doing so, I have aimed to demonstrate how the elegance of his writing actually works in the service of the subject matter of his poems.

The three interlocking foundation stones supporting Hecht's work are: his apprenticeship as a poet fashioning work according to the tenets of the New Critical school; his love of language and the inherent lusciousness of words, springing from his admiration of the poetic theory of Santayana; and finally, the influence of the metaphysical poets, in particular Donne and Herbert. I have argued that all three elements provide Hecht with a rich linguistic palette.

Some critics have claimed that Hecht's erudition and elegance diminish his poetic contribution, producing work full of "adjectival filler". This charge was prosecuted by Donald Davie but, as I have shown, it persisted throughout Hecht's career. This claim, along with Hecht's formal approach to writing poetry, has, in different ways, led to an argument that these elements make his poetry superficial or still-born. On the contrary, I have argued that the matters canvassed in his work are enhanced by his linguistic repertoire; form with content makes his poetry work, as the two cannot be separated from each other. This debate about balance within Hecht's work and poetry, in general, is a contemporary one, as Heaney and Post have indicated.

Hecht's poetic work in tackling the question of moral evil, revivifying poetry's capacity to create imagined characters within stories, as well as his mastery of the lyric genre infusing it with passion, requires, as Post says, a reinvestigation of his work. I have argued that the inquiry and topics covered by his work are enhanced by a balance between elegant language and subject matter. For Hecht, formality is not just adherence to the dictates of rhyme, meter or stanza; it is a patterning of emotional responses, opening up vivid inquiries

about how we live and respond to the world around us. He was prepared to engage with a wider range of forms in writing, to accommodate the balance between substance and elegance. His acceptance of other styles of writing is no more evident than in his discussion of formal verse in the introduction to *Melodies Unheard*, where he discusses his attempts to “break out” from inherited metrical schemes, referring to the practice of William Carlos Williams. Here he echoes Post’s warnings. Hecht says that the “fixed poetic forms all too often become associated with conventions of feeling – the sonnet initially with love poetry – and it became easy to fall into habitual sentiments, familiar metaphors, and conventional symbols when adopting such a form” (Hecht *Melodies* 3). While Hecht does not fall into this trap, he claims that formality can “add not only to a poem’s elegance but to its persuasive music” (3). The poems that I have considered in this thesis demonstrate how persuasive this music can be when the balance between form and substance has been achieved.

Hecht uses his technical gifts in an unflinching questioning of the theological foundations of moral evil. This human concern—that by our own acts we have rendered life’s purpose null and void of any meaning—haunt many of Hecht’s poems. He did more than this. Hecht explored in these poems⁷⁶ two major theological approaches: Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” and Balthasar’s “theo-dramatic” methodology in considering Leibniz’s concept of theodicy. How is the gap between human free will and divine free will to be comprehended or indeed reconciled? In such poems as ““More Light! More Light!”” and the “Rights and Ceremonies” sequence, Hecht explores the prospect of there being no resolution to our appeals for an understanding of divine justice (Hecht *Hard Hours* 38, 64). Nihilism, though, is resisted, as he continues to embrace a hope grounded in the belief that our continued actions matter in and of themselves, despite unspeakable moral evil. In “1945”,⁷⁷ he confronts the silence that may be the response to our prayers. Elegance is harnessed to sharpen and illuminate the substantial questions posed by Hecht and to fashion a possible answer for us today.

⁷⁶ From *The Hard Hours*, “A Hill” (2), “Rites and Ceremonies” (38-47), ““More Light!, More Light!”” (64); from *A Summoning of Stones*, “Japan” (10), “Christmas is Coming” (31); from *Millions of Strange Shadows*, “Poem upon the Lisbon Disaster: Or, An Inquiry Into The Adage, “All Is For The Best”” (72) and from *Darkness and the Light*, “Sacrifice” (33-38).

⁷⁷ “1945” is the third section of the poem “Sacrifice”.

I have then shown that, rather than being blindly conservative or constrained by an arid formality, Hecht experimented with the constraints and rich possibilities of poetry, as he observed it in contemporary American literature. Formality was not a straightjacket but the bones upon which new and creative aspects of approaching substantive moral and social issues could be fleshed out. He explicitly wished to create dramatic characters who, through story and dialogue, explore what it is to be alive at both a personal and social level. My thesis explores this aspect of his work, considering character diversity, the imagined situations in which these characters are placed and his project to reintroduce stories within poems. Again, intertextual references are brilliantly applied to anchor the unfolding drama in such poems as “The Grapes” or the “Presumptions of Death” sequence (Hecht *Vespers* 3; *Flight* 3-52). He juxtaposes direct speech and American argot with his own undoubted command of language to dramatically drive the story in “The Short End” and “See Naples and Die”, bringing the characters to life and sharpening the reader’s engagement and judgement on the unfolding stories (Hecht *Vespers* 9; *Transparent* 21). These poems experiment with, and stretch, the accepted limits of Hecht’s elegant style, revealing the poet’s considerable dexterity in fashioning his work. Santayana’s influence is evident in these poems, as our lives and our societal values are held up to scrutiny.

Finally, while his lyrical poems began by resting on erudite argument and an ironic concatenation of images, his later work embodies a more dramatic and imaginatively involved engagement. The passionate ending of “A Birthday Poem” and “Peripeteia” or the acute observations of social mores in “Ghost in the Martini” are all evidence of this greater emotional engagement (Hecht *Millions* 21, 36, 56). Images of light with contrasting shadows are prominent in “Despair”, “The Darkness And The Light Are Both Alike To Thee” and “Sarabande On Attaining The Age of Seventy-Seven”. They stretch our comprehension of what it is to see well beyond the physical act. In “Despair” light acts as an axis round which contrasts of emotional states are compared; in “The Darkness And The Light Are Both Alike To Thee” the reversal of what brings or extinguishes life is woven through a play on the cycle of day and night. Finally, in “Sarabande On Attaining The Age of Seventy-Seven”, failing sight and memory cloud the mind, blurring memory but bringing the gift of forgiveness (Hecht *Darkness* 24, 63, 65). These final poems, in particular, are a seamless marriage of form and elegance. They marry a creative reworking of a formal style that recognises his

debt to Santayana and his so-called “metaphysical” antecedents, Donne and Herbert, into a deeply emotional voice.

These three aspects are by no means exhaustive, but they give his poetry relevance and depth for today.

Words were always important to Hecht, as was their placing in a poem, as evidenced in his discussion of lines by Giles Fletcher, in the introduction to *Melodies Unheard* (Hecht *Melodies* 4). This thesis has taken its cue from Hecht’s passion and has been text-centred in its approach, seeking to demonstrate the value of such a reading of Hecht’s work.

There is also, in Hecht’s poetry, an unrelenting inquiry into what it is to be human, along with the belief that the act of writing poetry will, in and of itself, offer us a possible comprehension of human purpose. His poems are written with imagination and drama and are, in Horace’s term, infused with delight. In the final chapter of *The Hidden Law* Hecht claims that he was

determined to address myself to those poems of Auden’s...that particularly delighted, interested or (sometimes) provoked me, but especially those works that inspired admiration or seemed to demand comment and elucidation.

(Hecht *Hidden Law* 438)

I have taken the same approach to Hecht’s work, considering those that inspired admiration by combining substance with elegance. I have demonstrated that Hecht’s poetry has, certainly in the areas I have chosen to look at, a depth of inquiry that challenges the careful reader, is sophisticated in thought and tackles central human issues of the modern world. Now that we can evaluate all his work, it is time for a reassessment of his place in modern poetry.

There is perhaps no better conclusion to my thesis on Anthony Hecht than by quoting his poem “The Plastic and the Poetic Form” to which I referred in Chapter One:

Let that Greek youth out of clay
 Mold an urn to fashion
 Beauty, gladdening the eye
 With deft handed vision.

But the poet's sterner test
 Urges him to seize on
 A Euphrates of unrest,
 Fluid in evasion.

Duly bathed and cooled, his mind,
 Ardorless, will utter
 Liquid song, his forming hand
 Lend a shape to water.

(Darkness 43)

This poem does praise the role that the “forming hand” can play in writing poetry but it is explicit also, in pointing to the importance of balancing the “Euphrates of unrest” that is the substance of life’s experiences with the thought and elegance of his craft, its “liquid song” in fashioning a poem that provides insight. This deft balance is evident in all his work where elegant craft is married to what it is to be human.

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