Anthony Hecht, Selected Poems (review)

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The first time I heard Anthony Hecht read his poems, I was startled when a voice of precision and elegance rolled out over the audience with what sounded like an Oxford accent. It must have been in the mid-1960s that I had lured Hecht to Tufts by suggesting that the local Phi Beta Kappa Society name him poet for their annual ceremony. I had known and admired Hecht’s work ever since discovering his first collection, A Summoning of Stones (1954), going for nineteen cents in a Times Square remainder bookshop. Snapping up ten copies, I distributed them to fellow aspiring poets in Ann Arbor. But before meeting him, I had formed no mental picture of Hecht himself. In person, he seemed to me a most gracious and courtly gentleman, although I couldn’t help thinking, why the somewhat stilted manner of reading? And so it was a pleasure to hear him again in 1999 at the West Chester poetry conference, reading with the same precision but with a total lack of presumption, in an accent that sounded (for better or worse) Ohio-standard American.

Hecht’s work from early to late did not sharply change from a self-conscious ornateness to plain speech, nothing like Robert Lowell’s self-transformation in Life Studies, but compare Hecht’s first book with his last all-new collection, The Darkness and the Light of 2001, and you will sense some partial alteration of that kind. Looking back on A Summoning of Stones in a later interview, Hecht characterized the general tone of the book as “jaunty and distant, cool and artificed,” its more serious poems placing terrible realities at too great an artistic distance, poems he now considered “too full of devices.” It would seem that Hecht had confronted a problem that could trouble only a poet of his tremendous skill, one who had served under fire in the infantry, beheld terrible things, and felt a moral obligation to speak of them. As he told the same interviewer, Philip Hoy, “I felt I was performing duties that pulled me in opposing directions: one was to honor and commemorate the tragedies and horrors of war, while the other was to compose elegant and well-crafted poems in the manner of those poets who were still my models” (among them, Auden). In the poem “Speech” in that first collection, he spelled out this dilemma:

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,
Then praise was for a kind of art
Whereof there is no school;
There the unlettered instinct rides
In all its bodily skill.

Though tempted to go along with that sleight of tongue, Hecht managed to incorporate World War II into those early poems, but was reticent in speaking of it. As an infantry rifleman in the Ninety-Seventh Division, he had taken part in the Battle of the Ruhr Pocket, crawling along a battlefront under fire—“Keep to the frozen ground or else be killed,” as he remembers in the wry “Christmas Is Coming.” At the liberation of Flossen­burg concentration camp, an annex of Buchenwald, he had encountered hundreds of dying prisoners. He had once seen a group of German mothers and small children mowed down by American machine-guns when they were trying to surrender; and he told Hoy, “For years after, I would wake up shrieking.” Yet most of the war poems in A Summoning of Stones concentrate on small moments of relief from the tedium of soldiering. He tells of entering a deserted home in Germany and finding cognac (“Drinking Song”), of watching a young girl dance naked in a pasture thinking herself alone (“As Plato Said”), of observing nature through a rifle sight (“Harangue”). None of those poems makes it into J. D. McClatchy’s judicious selection, but the ironic, disturbing “Christmas Is Coming” survives. McClatchy’s introduction points us to the franker, more terrifying poem “Rites and Ceremonies,” which derives not only from Hecht’s experience—seeing a fellow soldier have his head blown off, meeting survivors of a concentration camp—but also what he had later learned of the Holocaust.

Hecht’s powers as an engaging storyteller are nowhere better shown than in poems apparently autobiographical. In no way a member of the confessional school, he nevertheless writes memorably of his first wife’s miscarriage in “The Vow”:

Doctors of Science, what is man that he
Should hope to come to a good end? The best
Is not to have been born. And could it be
That Jewish diligence and Irish jest
The consent of flesh and a midwinter storm
Had reconciled,
Was yet too bold a mixture to inform
A simple child?
That fine poem is somewhat marred by a stanza of Lowell-like bombast (“Mother, a child lay gasping for bare breath / On Christmas Eve when Santa Claus had set / Death in the stocking...”), but all in all, it is deeply moving. A quite different narrative, “The Ghost in the Martini,” is an almost comic account of picking up a young woman at a party, when the elder make-out artist characterizes himself when he was twenty:

Moody and self-obsessed,
Unhappy, defiant, with guilty dreams galore,
Full of ill-natured pride, an unconfessed
Snob and a thorough bore.

Whereupon out of the martini his younger self springs to life and talks back to him.

Both of those poems have a feature that might seem outmoded to certain readers today: they are cast in ingenious stanza forms. Such readers may be like those college students of whom Hecht speaks in “The Music of Forms” in his final collection of essays, Melodies Unheard (2003):

It became transparently clear that the overwhelming majority of my students were quite simply deaf to almost all metrical considerations... And I reluctantly concluded that there are many who are not so much mystified by meter as completely oblivious to it.

An awareness of meter, he decided, is required to enjoy the skill that it takes to repeat an exact stanza pattern. And his own disposition to write in such patterns seems due to his fondness for music. Songs, after all, demand “that stanzas reduplicate one another formally so that the same musical text can be repeated.” Though Hecht’s poems are not set forth as song lyrics, yet they are musical: they go to those unheard melodies.

Critics have remarked on the persistence of gloom and darkness in Hecht’s poetry, a tendency to which the poet has owned up. In a Paris Review interview with McClatchy, Hecht cited William James’s division of people into “healthy-minded” souls (innately cheerful and optimistic) and “sick” souls, and he identified with the latter group. The sadness in his poems he called the residue “of what in childhood had been a poisonous brew of fear, hatred, self-loathing, impotence and deep discouragement.” At one time, when divorce had separated him from his two sons, a bout of depression sent him for three months to a hospital. Still, perhaps this view of Hecht as a poet of melancholy has obscured his capacity for laughter—his humor, wit, his satiric resourcefulness. His invention of the comic verse form of the double dactyl, introduced in the collection Jiggery-Pokery he co-edited with John Hollander, carried his own fondness for ingenuity to a ludicrous extreme. And a first-rate piece of light verse that
McClatchy includes, “Samuel Sewall,” recounts how that noted colonial dignitary courted a lady, until she objected to his refusal to wear a wig. So much for her.

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 . . .

What word could be better than tolerably there? Hecht was also master of the epigram, four specimens of which he generously contributed to the first issue of a little magazine that my wife and I co-edited, Counter/Measures. Forgive me if I digress for a moment to recall the finest of them—a devastating snarl at a poet who uses a trendy cause to promote himself:

Here lies fierce Strephon, whose poetic rage
Lashed out on Viet Nam from page and stage;
Whereby from basements of Bohemia he
Rose to the lofts of sweet celebrity;
Being, by Fortune (our Eternal Whore)
One of the few to profit by that war;
A fate he shared—it bears much thinking on—
With certain persons in the Pentagon.

I call that a masterpiece, but Hecht never collected it. Among other evidence of his acerbic wit is “The Presumptions of Death,” a series from which McClatchy gives us seven of the best parts together with woodcuts by Leonard Baskin. Death is cast in various roles, including that of a film director, who enables the large cast of humanity to fall into place, fulfilling “an inevitable plot.” “Death the Poet” follows the pattern of a ballade by Villon. Hecht’s humor is amply demonstrated, too, in “The Dover Bitch,” his celebrated take-off on Matthew Arnold (“To have been brought / All the way down from London, and then be addressed / As a sort of mournful cosmic last resort / Is really tough on a girl, and she was pretty”). Not incidentally, Hecht was also known for reciting on occasion Milton’s “Lycidas” in the manner of W.C. Fields.

From the cover of the book, a photograph of the poet stares out at us intently and a bit skeptically. Although the picture was taken earlier (it appeared in 1990 on the jacket of The Transparent Man), it is as if Hecht has at last won self-confidence. In contrast, the portrait on the cover of the British edition of The Hard Hours (1967) is less serene: the younger Hecht looks beaten down, as if he had not slept for days. Indeed, pain and sadness seem more dominant in the earlier work. “The late poems,” McClatchy remarks, “are quieter, reconciled, more accepting”—an accurate judgment that does not belittle them.
It couldn’t have been easy to pick and choose from Hecht’s half-century of excellent production, and McClatchy, to whom the poet dedicated “Mirror,” is eminently well qualified for the job. I have combed through the seven books distilled in this *Selected Poems* and find surprisingly few omissions to carp about. Oh, brilliant poems, perhaps lesser, did not make the cut—“Pig,” “Goliardic Song,” “Rara Avis in Terris,” and several more I love. But if I had to carp, I’d seriously bemoan only the absence of “La Condition Botanique,” “The Cost,” and “A Death in Winter,” this last an elegy for Joseph Brodsky. To be sure, no selection can include everything; Hecht’s work might easily sustain a collected poems that wouldn’t have a weak page in it. But let me not sound ungrateful: J. D. McClatchy has given us an accurate and generous survey of Hecht’s work. He appends conscientious notes to quotations and allusions, some of the notes Hecht’s, others helpful only to readers who haven’t heard of the Keystone Kops or Bromo-Seltzer. He traces Hecht’s life and career in a detailed chronology. Anyone with an annual budget for poetry of $17.95 will do well to blow it all on the paperback edition of this book, for I cannot think of a contemporary poet who, page for page, delivers richer rewards.

—X. J. Kennedy


Calling someone a poet’s poet is damning with faint praise, like saying that caviar is too rich, delicate, and complex for ordinary tastes, or that fancy hotels make one feel uncomfortable. The late Amy Clampitt (1920–1994) wrote poems that are indeed rich, delicate, and complex, and for these she received as much derision as praise, from both other poets and general readers, during her lifetime. But now, three decades after her first poems appeared, what shall we say? We can never predict which ledge of Parnassus will ultimately harbor which poets, and the seating arrangements vary with time, as tastes change and yesterday’s “immortals” are replaced by tomorrow’s favorites. Canon-making is a fool’s game, because one generation’s canon becomes the next one’s cannon fodder. For the most part, Elizabeth Bishop being the one great exception, the reputations of poets decline after the deaths. Making bets, however, is always tempting. I think, or at least wish, that Clampitt will survive.

It is good, especially for partisans of Clampitt, those of us who saw and believed, who loved her poems, and who welcomed her comet-like rise onto the scene in the 1980s, to have her back in print. Mary Jo Salter, editor of *The Collected Poems*, has done us, especially professors and our students, and—we can only hope—new readers, a great service by bringing the collected work into a manageable form, reducing Clampitt’s five elegant, original Knopf volumes to slightly less than 300 pages. Culling is never easy, and every Clampitt aficionado will notice and regret the