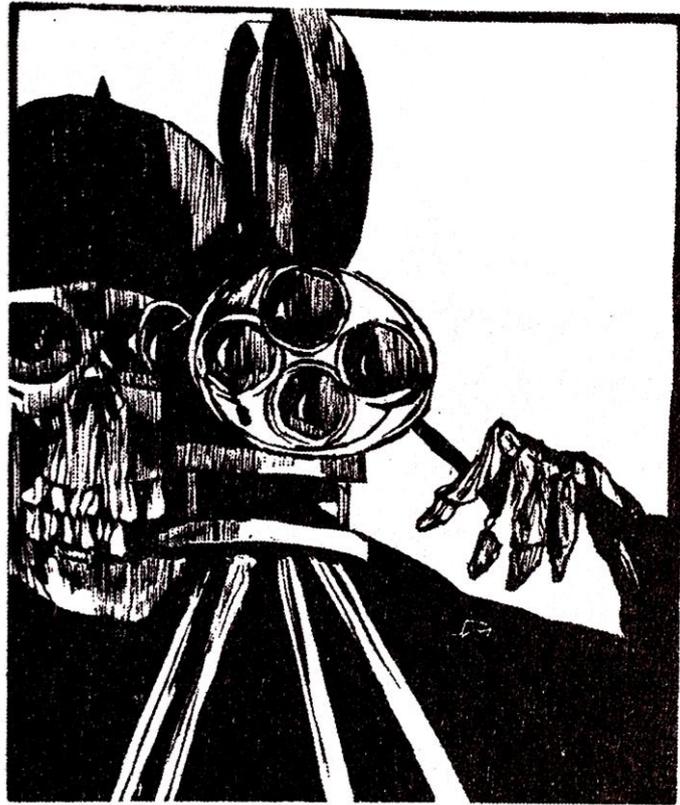


IMAGES AND VIOLENCE IN THE POETRY OF ANTHONY HECHT



Leonard Baskin. *Death the Film Director* (1995).

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Introduction

There is a fine body of excellent poetry, some of it of the very first class, that comes close to being devoid of any imagery. (Anthony Hecht, *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* 20)

Anthony Hecht made this statement in the first of his Andrew W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 1992. This is a poet that can talk about paintings, and one that often does so in order to talk about poetry. But this declaration is surprising from a writer that opens one of his poems in the following manner:

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 carven shafts of noon that coast
 Down through the summer trees in a golden dazzle.¹ (*EP* 125)

This stanza, belonging to “A Birthday Poem” from *Millions of Strange Shadows*, stockpiles imagery in its cumulative similes, which are exclusively confined to the domain of the visual sense. It might be argued that this poetic subject and these particular similes were chosen to express the very intangibility of images in general: as fast as they crystallise, they dissolve with their retracted “substance or edges.” The images of art, suggested here by “shafts of noon” that are “carven,” subsequently begin to surface in explicit references to Mantegna and Holbein before, having made

¹ All further citations of Hecht's poems come from his *Collected Earlier Poems* (Oxford: UP, 1998), and *Collected Later Poems* (London: Wayweiser, 2004). These are abbreviated to *EP* and *LP*, respectively.

various associative visual detours, the poem concludes in the description of a photograph (*EP* 125-7).

“A Birthday Poem” is saturated with imagery. It provides an evaluation as well as a catalogue of the various physical and psychological manifestations of images. In order to understand the relative merits of this style of writing, it is necessary to turn back to Hecht’s lecture, and to his elaboration of the substance of the imageless poetry that is its antithesis:

These poems, and many others like them, are not devoid of metaphors, or even an occasional image, but such images are incidental to their chief effect, which is largely rhetorical.² (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 20)

Hecht conceives of images in poetry as quantifiable matter, as building blocks that may either constitute extraneous flourishes, or perhaps the very material necessary to the effects that poems hope to, or do, achieve. It is possible that the “chief effect” of Hecht’s own kind of poetry is the very vividness and abundance of its images. Yet it is equally possible that his images are marshalled to some other purpose. The effects of Hecht’s poetry are as likely to be horrifying as dazzling. This fact can be appreciated in a later stanza of “A Birthday Poem,” in which the attentive gazer directs his attention to more troubling visions. The scholars of history, it is said, “display” no tears at painful sights:

And with their Zeiss binoculars descry
 Verduns and Waterloos,
 The man-made mushroom’s deathly overplus,
 Caesars and heretics and Jews
 Gone down in blood, without batting an eye,

² Roland Barthes might argue, to the contrary, that images produce an effect that is precisely rhetorical (“Rhetoric of the Image”).

As if all history were deciduous. (*EP* 126)

The apparatuses of image making must include “Zeiss binoculars” as well as the family camera that is also brought to the eye in this poem. In addition to a misguided understanding of history, the term “deciduous” equally describes the poem’s periodic shedding of images. It is not that violent images arbitrarily replace others on occasion, but that they regenerate as a result of the belief that the creation of images must attend to the sights of destruction. Hecht is doing more than “batting an eye” in the direction of the violence that pervades “all history.”

This thesis examines the various levels at which the poetic text interacts with images. Leaving its violent implications temporarily aside, that process might involve three discernible activities: first, verbal imagery that conjures sights and scenes chiefly through metaphor; second, the citation, representation, and emulation of existing or imagined works of visual art in the ekphrastic mode; third, the inclusion of pictures alongside written verse. This simplified scheme relies upon definitions and categorisations drawn from theoretical work on images in the field of aesthetic philosophy, and from accounts of their complicated relationship with language and the verbal arts in the fields of literary and art criticism.

Modes of interaction with images can also be understood as ways of making them. Images are not merely subjects for poetry, but often comprise its essential matter. W. J. T. Mitchell accounts for the presence of the image within the discourses of art and literature, which exemplifies the instability of what is meant by that term, in his necessarily inductive definition:

[The image] plays a role in both the visual and verbal arts, as the name of the represented content of a picture or its overall formal gestalt . . . or it can designate a verbal motif, a named thing or quality, a metaphor or other

‘figure,’ or even the formal totality of a text as a ‘verbal icon.’” (*What Do Pictures Want?* 2)

The diverse incarnations of images within the verbal art of poetry, and their relation to the visual sense, will be examined closely in chapter one. This will involve an extensive description of what images are actually understood to be, and of what constitutes an image in Hecht’s poetry. The work of Mitchell and Jacques Rancière will serve as the background for an introduction to the intensely visual or pictorial quality of Hecht’s art, and the often controversial pronouncements of Slavoj Žižek and Jean-Luc Nancy will inform an attempt to delineate the nature of images of violence.

The transference of “the represented content of a picture” into language (*What Do Pictures Want?* 2), that is the crafting of one kind of image out of another, will be explored in chapter two. The concept at the core of that question, which will also feature throughout the thesis as a whole, is ekphrasis. This is broadly defined by James Heffernan as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). The ekphrastic mode from Homer onwards is understood to afford a kind of security in the stillness of a descriptive pause, in its attempt to imitate the qualities of visual art objects. The work of Murray Krieger and Wendy Steiner will be tested by Hecht’s refusal of the ekphrastic capacity to shield, before the discourse around the notion of impossible or responsible representation is brought to bear upon the poet’s oeuvre as a whole.

Where the poetic text does not merely describe pictures, but is actually combined with them in a fusion of verbal and visual signs, the artistic product thereby created is known as an “imagetext.” In Mitchell’s coinage, it “designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text” (*Picture Theory* 89).

Hecht's production of such synthetic works, in collaboration with American woodcut artist Leonard Baskin, and their presentation of death, is the subject of chapter three. Their examination will incorporate studies in visual design and the parallel communication of language and images, by Mitchell, Roland Barthes, and Kress and van Leeuwen.

These brief definitions serve here only to indicate the subject at hand: their respective theoretical discourses will be examined in greater depth within each of the three chapters to follow. The discussion will unfold around this foundational concern with technical and theoretical matters internal to poetics, and will develop to consider the historical, ethical, and psychological significance of the various kinds of image embedded in, or created by, Hecht's art. A "certain slant" inflecting this central question will pay particular attention to the subjects of violence and death as they relate to image making.³ In addition to their emergence as preoccupations in the poetry, it will also be possible to speak of a kind of violence enacted by and to images, which would represent a counterpoint to Hecht's perceived dislocation of art from "our particularly modern kinds of barbarity, desolation, and inhumanity" (*Hidden Law* 428).

The context of Hecht's writing is the period between the Second World War and the turn of the millennium (he lived between 16 January 1923, and 20 October 2004). The proliferation of images in Western culture in this period garners a great deal of critical attention. Mitchell identifies "pervasive technologies of simulation and mass mediation," as well as "anxieties about the power of visual culture," in a society that is "dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations, and fantasies" (*Picture Theory* 2). This proposed state of

³ "A Certain Slant" is the title of a Hecht poem concerning visual fixation upon a "float of motes," comparable to the "midges" in "A Birthday Poem" (*LP* 194).

culture involves a confusion about, and subsequent effort to decide, which subjects are ripe for projection and dispersal as images. Their accuracy, ethics and value are all under question. Susan Sontag is especially disparaging in her announcement that “humankind lingers unregeneratively in Plato’s cave, still revelling, its old-age habit, in mere images of the truth” (3). Her pronouncement encapsulates the negative side of a profound ambivalence towards the role of the image in twentieth century human life.

Also engaging in this debate, in his account of the “critique of the hegemony of sight” in twentieth century French philosophy (389), Martin Jay exposes a form of modern iconoclasm in his suggestion that, after the First World War, “the denigration of sight was expressed with an intensity that often bordered on violence” (209). Of the influential Francophone image-thinkers he implicates, Jacques Derrida denounces *The Truth in Painting*, while Michel Foucault claims that, of two visual alternatives, “Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance” (217). Jacques Rancière, whose views will be considered in this study, also inquires about *The Future of the Image* by “examining how a certain idea of fate and a certain idea of the image are tied up in the apocalyptic discourses of today’s cultural climate” (1). However, the intensity of this debate does not necessarily suggest that the twentieth century has actually experienced a more troubled relationship with images than other historical periods. Rather, the very fact that this issue has been so openly acknowledged and thoroughly diagnosed indicates that, in this period, Western culture came (or continued to come) to self-consciousness about its image problem.

With the emergence of various new and immersive media technologies, however, the cultural weight carried by poetry is liable to decrease. It should be expected, at the least, that poetic subjects and styles adapt in response to these developments, if, as Marx Wartofsky claims, “*human* vision is an artefact, produced

by means of other artefacts – for example, by pictures; as such, it is a historically variable mode of perception, which changes with changes in modes of representation” (307). Poetry both relies heavily on human vision for its descriptive content, and is itself a mode of representation that may influence changes in human vision or the ways in which visual information is processed linguistically.

The canon of American Poetry in the middle of the twentieth century, according to the terms of Robert Lowell as he described the scene in 1960, may be divided into “the raw and the cooked.” Like that of Louis Simpson, Richard Wilbur, William Carlos Williams, James Merrill, and others, Hecht’s work would fit Lowell’s description of “cooked” poetry, which is “marvellously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar.” The opposite camp, populated largely by the New York poets and the Beat group, and to which Lowell thought himself newly applicable, wrote “huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience . . . dished up for midnight listeners” (Lowell).

In line with his classical preferences and early formalist poetics, Hecht’s extensive dealings with images might be classified as “cooked.” He rejects the modern period of pervasive image culture as a timeframe from which to source ekphrastic objects, instead returning to the canonical art of the past. Matisse is the most recent painter he discusses, and the Italian Renaissance features heavily in his verse. However, Hecht treads relatively fresh ground in the production of less conventional image-text interactions, which develop his morbid fascinations in unusual ways, and necessitate a moderation of the designation of his poetry as “cooked.”

Commentators upon Hecht’s verse inevitably return to the apparent friction between his virtuosic control of obscure and strict poetic forms, his civilised voice,

and its erudite, archaic diction, and their crystallization around savage and brutal subject matter.⁴ Harrowing instances of genocide, miscarriage, torture, mutilation, disease, and death, coexist with enraptured descriptions of landscapes and the beauty of life's minutiae, in poems about dreaming, tourism, music, Shakespeare, food, and art. The former constitute the "raw" material of human nature as it is displayed across history, transposed into a calm and "cooked" (if bitter) emotional response to the world. A possible explanation for this predilection for images of suffering is to be found in Hecht's autobiographical statements concerning the sights with which he was confronted in his lifetime, as well as his favoured modes of access to artistic culture, and to the histories lying behind it.

Following his childhood and education in New York City, Hecht went to Europe to fight in the Second World War (Hoy 13). His "unit arrived in France on March 2, 1945, and saw combat in Germany and Czechoslovakia, notably in the Battle of the Ruhr pocket, between April 2 and VE day on May 8" (Lindsay 643). While in Germany, Hecht's division also participated in the liberation of Flossenbürg concentration camp (Hoy 26). Aside from "Flossenbürg, the greatest trauma of the war," Hecht "saw a lot of terrible things" during this period (Hoy 26). The direct apprehension of this ultimate instance of depravity certainly influences his awareness of the horrific potential of things seen. That experience also yields a further anxiety. Owing to his German-Jewish background, the cultural processing of the holocaust, with its anti-Semitic ideology, occupies a significant place in Hecht's imagination:

I feel that undue indignation on my part would be a vulgar appropriation of the suffering of others for cheap rhetorical purposes and a contemptible kind of self-promotion. At the same time, I cannot help identifying with all Jews

⁴ See Lea xii, Leithauser 5, Brown 25, Hoffman 44, and Ostriker 99, in *The Burdens of Formality*.

who have experienced persecution, for I have felt the effects of anti-Semitism throughout the whole of my life, though not in extremis, and I invariably wince at finding it widespread in Western literature. (Letter to David Havird, 30 December 1997)

The position of the witness or observer channels Hecht's overriding aesthetic experiences of the Second World War, but he struggles with the eligibility of that standing. The inhumanity of the holocaust, the "sense of unrelieved horror" it produced (Hoy 28), is both a principal source of rage, and a cause for consideration and restraint. This feeling of responsibility both necessitates and moderates Hecht's presentation of images of violence.

However, the poet sees in Europe not only combat and genocide in Germany, but the artistic and architectural masterpieces of Italy.⁵ When questioned about the tendency in his generation of American poets to temporarily relocate to Europe, Hecht states that, "We probably all went to Europe for different reasons. In my own case, it was first to go back for pleasure after having had to fight a war there (though I had no desire whatever to trace my earlier movements or revisit Germany)" (Hoy 42). Traces of his earlier movements in Germany do, however, resurface in Hecht's poetic inspection of the culture of Europe. He is unable to separate or reconcile the abominations of history from the artistic expression that is concurrent with them. In this way his images, and reactions to them, are frequently pervaded by violence:

I have always found that the stories and paintings of Christian martyrdom are very strange because they can be understood in two different and opposing ways. The orthodox way is to say that they inspire admiration for fixity of faith in the face of the most horrible and obstinate persecution. At the same

⁵ He was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1951 and spent some time touring the country during his residence there (Hoy 13).

time, of course, they are often remarkable for their morbidity, and, alas, a part of their meaning seems to concern the ineradicable savagery of the human race. (Hoy 59)

For Hecht, “the ineradicable savagery of the human race” is a permanent concern in his poetry as well as in all of the arts. The kinds of violent experience present in his work include war on a global scale, its repercussions for identity, as well as cases of individual brutality that resonate across history and literary accounts. The basic definition of violence to be employed here is that of David Riches, which refers to “an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses” (qtd. in Schinkel 32).⁶ The artifice and exhibition implicit in the term “performance,” and the state of observation implied in the notion of witnessing, hint at the ways in which images are implicated in violence in general. Jean-Luc Nancy, further, relates the proliferation of images in modern life to the collective experience of suffering and pain. He states that “images are violent: we often speak of being ‘bombarded by advertising,’” and further claims that “images of violence, of the ceaseless violence breaking out all over the world, are omnipresent” (Nancy 15). This position, affirming both the violence depicted within images and the violence enacted by them, especially in the cultural climate of the twentieth century, will be found to accord closely with Hecht’s own perspective.

On the subject of the violence of images, Žižek also contends that “It is deeply symptomatic that our Western societies, which display such sensitivity to different forms of harassment, are at the same time able to mobilize a multitude of mechanisms destined to render us insensitive to the most brutal forms of violence” (206-7).

⁶ Hannah Arendt’s seminal treatise *On Violence* focuses on its “instrumental character” (46): violence, she claims, is defined by its “implements” (1, 46). Her work surveys the importance of technological developments in violence from the perspective of international relations, and its implications are therefore beyond the scope of this study.

Hecht's poetry participates in the proliferation of such images, though it does so primarily with the opposite aim to the anaesthetization Žižek describes. The appearance of violent images in his poems is typically accompanied by some kind of commentary upon their parallel incursion in supposedly civilized society. In "Apprehensions" the reader is, familiarly, confronted with:

A headless body recently unearthed
 On the links of an exclusive country club –
 That fleshed out terribly what loyal readers
 Hankered for daily in the name of news. (*EP* 154)

Extrapolating his pun, images are constantly deployed in Hecht's work to "flesh out" moments of violence and death, or precisely to flesh out the possibly dangerous state of contemporary image culture.

Images are implicated in the violence that characterises both the perpetration of global atrocities and their public dissemination. According to the poet, in the quotation or imitation of another, a painting "can require the viewer to remember earlier contexts, to see them strangely, significantly, or shockingly revived in new ones" (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 26). This is also true of poems that quote paintings. The tension between the visual source material and its transference into language affords an especially self-reflexive examination of the role of vision in viewing art and witnessing suffering, and the responsibilities involved in representation in general. The friction between verbal and visual signs in ekphrastic poetry is amplified further still in composite imagetexts. The antagonistic, even fatal, qualities with which images are elsewhere associated are, in the case of Hecht's collaboration with Leonard Baskin, injected into an active dialogue (or stand-off) between poem and image. In the chapters to follow, this thesis contends that the force and novelty of

Hecht's deployment of various kinds of images reside in their conceptual relation to, and preoccupation with, violence and death.

Chapter One

Testing Sight: Images and Violence

Verbal Images

Far from signifying a strictly defined and unilateral order of phenomena, images refer to a vast array of divergent objects and mental processes whose common denominator is largely a dependence on the visual sense either as a means of access to images, or as a metaphorical way of understanding their less concrete incarnations. W. J. T. Mitchell, refusing to provide “some universal definition of the term,” assembles a loose catalogue of types of image, that includes:

Graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, “species,” appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata), verbal (metaphors, descriptions). (*Iconology* 10).

Mitchell argues that the distinctions between what he temporarily refers to as “images ‘proper’” and their diverse “offspring,” listed above, are invalid (*Iconology* 14). His conception of images is inductive, and encourages comparison between their differentiated tangible forms within various institutional discourses, those of physics, psychology, art history, and so on (*Iconology* 9-10). In poetry images usually appear as subject matter or as occasions for writing: hallucinations, intrusions of memory, and pictures are especially prevalent in Hecht’s verse, for instance. Poetry would seem to afford fertile ground for the cross-pollination and juxtaposition of these proliferating kinds of images, and thus for the elucidation or demonstration of the overarching qualities of images, or of visuality, in general. However, in its verbal accomplishment of this feat of (sometimes secondary) representation, poetry is also confined to one of Mitchell’s proposed image offshoots, that which includes

metaphors and descriptions. Poetry is a mode of image making, and Hecht's work parades the various possible strategies involved in this task.

This chapter will first formulate an understanding of what constitutes an image in poetry, primarily involving verbal imagery and the distinct ekphrastic mode whereby images are transferred from one medium to another.⁷ This line of investigation, illustrated by exemplary or problematic moments in Hecht's poems, also necessitates a survey of the place of vision in poetic imagery (where "place" indicates location as well as role). The physical situation of looking, and the notion of perspective that implies opinion as well as a kind of viewing angle, will then be brought to bear upon images of violence. This discussion of comparatively common or conventional kinds of images in poetry, by contrast and similitude, will also inform the forthcoming examination of more experimental composite picture poems.

The term "image" is defined by Jacques Rancière as something that produces "the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand in for it" (6). This broad conception does not exclude any of the "offspring" of images listed by Mitchell. Rancière's work argues that the indiscriminate classification of extremely diverse phenomena under the single banner of the "image" is in fact culturally necessary. He asks, "Does not the term 'image' contain several functions whose problematic alignment precisely constitutes the labour of art?" (Rancière 1). This question is premised on the overabundance of referents and "functions" implicit in the term, and suggests that the artistic labour that is their "problematic alignment" involves productive encounters between the various conflicting capabilities of the image. Therefore, at the core of the image problem described by Rancière, is a contested claim to resemblance between the various types

⁷ To agree with Murray Krieger, the study of ekphrasis should afford, "the most extreme – and most useful – way to put into question the pictorial limits of the function of words in poetry" (6).

and functions of the image. Each kind of graphic, optical, or verbal image must resemble the others in some way in order for it to be included under the category of the image, but, he maintains, their functions cannot be aligned without problems.

The claim of resemblance between kinds of image, tested by the “labour of art,” consists precisely in their principal shared activity of resembling something else, since images are likenesses of originals (to pluralise Rancière’s definition). Plato’s conception similarly pivots around this aspect, though he moderates its importance in order to maintain the inclusivity of the term: “The image must not by any means reproduce all the qualities of that which it imitates, if it is to be an image” (432b, 163).⁸ Resemblance is certainly crucial to the conception of graphic and verbal images, but they tend to stop short of pure duplication. This fact, and its prevalence in modern visual art, leads Rancière to expand upon his definition of the image as “likeness.” The image refers, in addition, to the “interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance . . . “the images of art are, as such, dissemblances” (Rancière 6-7).⁹

Verbal imagery essentially comes about through figurative language, and typically refers to an image produced in the mind of the receiver (*Iconology* 21). Metaphor constitutes a form of the “dissemblance” of which Rancière speaks, since in signalling a condition of resemblance it also actually replaces the phenomenon or word in question with something entirely distinct from it. Verbal imagery is, according to Mitchell in his summary of the views of Joseph Addison and other eighteenth-century thinkers, “a style that reaches right out to objects, representing

⁸ It might also be claimed that an image must not by any means reproduce all of the qualities exhibited by the other kinds of image in order to continue to carry that title, including this quality of resemblance to external phenomena.

⁹ Examples of this “alteration of resemblance,” given by Rancière, include the pictorial “elongation of bodies that expresses their motion at the expense of their proportions; a turn of language that accentuates the expression of a feeling or renders the perception of an idea more complex” (6).

them . . . even more vividly than the objects can represent themselves” (*Iconology* 24). This verbal construct that better represents (whether or not it resembles) its original referent, pivots around the locution, “even more.” Perhaps, rather than indicating improvement, this phrase refers to excess, whereby “vividness” (rather, crucially, than “accuracy”) is contingent upon the diversity of associations ignited in figurative language.

By way of an example of verbal imagery, it being freighted with an excess of vividness and association beyond its original and existing in tense relation to resemblance, the re-presentation of one of Hecht’s staple figurations invites consideration. Such images arrive in verbal form, though the poet attests to their emergence in the mind (itself requiring a source in perception): “The image of smoke rising straight up from woodlands on a windless, overcast winter day is something that has settled somewhere deep inside me” (Hoy 110). This particular image has also settled in a handful of Hecht’s poems. “Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-Seven” associates smoke with memories and the debilitations of old age. Its speaker ingests “the smoke-and-pepper childhood smell / Of the smouldering immolation of the year,” while in his mind “The tribulations one somehow survives, / Rise smokily from propitiary flames // Of our forgetfulness,” to “This cinerous blur and smudge in which we live” (*LP* 236). Correspondingly, “An Autumnal” imbues the scent of leaves “Into the smoky weather,” which metamorphoses into “A sweet fetor, a ghost / Of foison, gently welcoming us near / To humus, mulch, compost” (*EP* 112). These two images share a synesthetic twist to the olfactible, the first also likening rising smoke to the workings of memory and the passing of youth, and thus engaging Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 73,” in which the embers and ashes of old age (“cinerous blur and smudge”) stand in for the human (and erotic) lifecycle (69). The image in the

second poem is a metaphoric dissemblance, as scent distilled into smoke (rather than the smell that is rendered smoky in “Sarabande”) takes on the morbid and supernatural character of decomposition and ghosts.

That connection is accentuated in “Death the Whore,” where the ghostly quality of smoke is literalised, and the link to death is made explicit from the title onwards. In that poem:

Some thin grey smoke twists up against a sky

Of German silver in the sullen dusk

From a small chimney among leafless trees. (*LP* 134)

The speaker of this poem subsequently admits that “The smoke, my dear, the smoke. I am the smoke” (*LP* 139). It is unclear whether this is merely an identification, that the speaker’s cremated remains are literally dispersed in the form of smoke, or itself a continuation of the image, wherein the smoke represents the speaker by dissemblance. Hecht’s further comments on this definitive use of the smoke image reveal the associative and coalescent logic that lies behind this ambiguity: “the smoke of the last line is a conflation of the smoke of Sylvia’s death camp, the death camp I saw myself, the ordinary funeral parlour crematorium and the smoke of an autumnal day mentioned in the opening lines” (Hoy 113). Such diverse but aligned visual cues do not all find explicit verbal communication in the description itself, but by virtue of the emotional weight of the premise of human smoke, they are implicit in the image and constitute its factor of excess or containing “even more.” Hecht’s image participates in what Rancière labels “the commonest regime of the image,” that is the presentation of “a relationship between the sayable and the visible, a relationship which plays on both the analogy *and* the dissemblance between them” (7). The reproduction of three versions of Hecht’s deeply-embedded smoke image here relies

on their resemblance to each other, although closer inspection reveals the divergent directions afforded by the variegated linguistic rendering of that image.

In light of this comment upon “death camp[s],” and the “sky / Of German silver” in the poem, a detour into the ghostly territory of the holocaust, and its relation to the spectral return of images, is necessary here. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida discusses ghosts, “be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence . . . or other kinds of exterminations” (xviii). The exemplary ghost has suffered physical or ideological injustices. Victims of Nazi concentration camps are therefore appropriate candidates, and through the incineration chamber they become both smoke and ghosts. Hecht writes of such “Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,” in “More Light! More Light!” (*EP* 65). The figure of human smoke rising from the death camps has its poetic precedent in Paul Celan’s “Fugue of Death,” which contains the lines, “he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you shall climb to the sky / then you’ll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie there” (34). It is not coincidental that Hecht’s prime recurring image of rising smoke contains the ashes of the holocaust (in line with the sinister, literal reading of “your ashen hair Shulamith” in Celan’s poem (34)). The holocaust haunts Hecht’s poetry, but its reappearance typically occurs in images far less subtle and oblique than the metaphor of smoke in these poems.¹⁰ Mitchell claims that:

You can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image. The image seems to float without any visible means of support, a phantasmic, virtual, or spectral appearance. It is what can be lifted off the picture, transferred to another medium, [or] translated into a verbal ekphrasis. (*What Do Pictures Want?* 85)

¹⁰ The subject of that trauma is made manifest in a further poem about ghosts, which does not feature smoke, named “The Book of Yolek.” This piece will be examined in the next sub-section.

In this conception, phantasmic smoke is an entirely appropriate figure for the fluxive nature of images, and for the traumatic aspect of the “spectral appearance” of certain subjects and images in woodlands, as throughout Hecht’s oeuvre.

The travesty of human smoke is equally present in non-literary texts oriented towards the holocaust. Adorno states, in *Negative Dialectics*, that “What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, ‘Tomorrow you’ll be wiggling skyward as smoke from this chimney,’ bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history” (362). Smoke is here reconfigured as a symbol of the arbitrary nature of this killing, which invalidates the autonomy of the individual. In his formulation, not merely the speaker of “Death the Whore,” nor even the victims of the holocaust, but everyone, in the aftermath of such inhumanity, is “The smoke, my dear, the smoke” (*LP* 139). This de-individualisation is a condition of the contested validity of the aesthetic in the wake of mass destruction, Adorno’s notorious claim about which will be engaged in the following chapter.

To return to images in general, Mitchell states that unlike its graphic and perceptual counterparts, “Verbal imagery . . . can involve all the senses, or it may involve no sensory component at all, sometimes suggesting nothing more than a recurrent abstract idea like justice or grace or evil” (*Iconology* 13). In this way, any images put in words are freighted with verbal concepts and “abstract ideas,” whether or not they have an original visual referent. The previous series of examples included an olfactory sensory component, but also arguably appended the non-visual ideas of “evil” and death to the chemical reaction causing smoke that is perceived by the eye and nose.¹¹ On the subject of sensory components within images, Hecht has stated that “the visual poet in me had to be deliberately and consciously cultivated. I had to

¹¹ The visual conception of death will be explored in the final chapter.

teach myself to see and then to find words for what I saw. It was not something which was spontaneous. And I knew that it was something that I absolutely needed” (“Efforts of Attention”).

This statement, which isolates sensory modes in poetry, can either be made to disagree with an evaluation of Hecht’s work by fellow poet Joseph Brodsky, or the latter may testify to the achievement of the impulse expressed in the former. Brodsky argues that Hecht’s work exhibits:

The total *identity* of the eye and the ear. While this poet sees, he speaks, and the word makes his eye linger on an object. The simultaneousness of this process animates the object and promotes it from the status of reality into a category, indeed into a state of mind. Or, to put it bluntly, into a vision, where the reality of this world, after all, belongs. (50)

Hecht acknowledges the importance of the visual in poetry, of images perspicuously seen, but separates the perceptual image from its verbal manifestation, claiming that the one in fact succeeds and derives from the other (“to see and then to find words”). Brodsky, alternatively, advocates simultaneity and reciprocity between sight and speech in the image making process. This second proposal can in fact be demonstrated in a poem containing one of the longest of Hecht’s self-contained images. An extract from “The Grapes” follows:

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. (*EP* 187)

In this instance, the likening of grapes to planets results in their sunlit swelling, two lines later, being classified as “Meridian” (*EP* 187), a verbal construct that is not imminent in grapes as such, and contains another, indirect, echo of Celan (His “Meridian” speech will receive due attention in chapter two). “Cheeks,” facial or gluteal, also builds upon “misted skins” and “smoky sweat” in the previous passage (*EP* 187). The fund of metaphors within the category of spherical objects is plundered in order to evince exactly the distinctive qualities of (these) grapes. Such images can neither be abstracted from their genesis in acts of perception, nor from their final (or simultaneous) rendering in words. In this case, the two work in tandem.

Ekphrasis and the Drama of Looking

The issue of the relative primacy and simultaneity of the processes of looking and describing is central to the concept of the ekphrastic image. This poetic mode is linked (however emphatically) with an existing or imagined work of visual art. It thus looks towards the concrete picture, which is able to be hung in Mitchell’s terms, as opposed to the “virtual” image (*What do Pictures Want?* 85). James Heffernan’s commonly accepted definition states that “Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). Yet, in accordance with the constant expansion of critical interest in ekphrasis, the range of its objects of study has inflated. Its definition would be better understood as the verbalisation (rather than the verbal representation) of visual art (rather than visual representation), in order for it to encompass the interrogative and experiential character of literary encounters with art objects, and so that the anachronistic designation of visual art as (primarily or necessarily) representational be updated. But this amendment would seek to expunge representation, in both its verbal and visual modes, from ekphrasis, or at least to

decentralise it. Within Hecht's oeuvre, at least, the artworks targeted for poetic treatment are all representational rather than abstract. Though the term "representation" alone does not sufficiently describe the poet's verbal treatment of visual art, it is significant to his ekphrastic work because those poems also comment on the act of representation, especially the ethical responsibility that it involves, and re-present certain subjects in a new, and often unforgiving, light.

The mechanics of this poetic mode involve a vast range of activities that engage its target picture(s) to a lesser or greater extent. Ekphrasis may exceed the original image, by adding explanation or interpretation to description (if these remain distinct in the first place), or by narrating the viewing experience and characterising its participants via the focalisation of the image. Yet the ekphrastic component in a poem may equally be confined to a brief reference or a comparison with an aspect of an artwork. Valerie Robillard distinguishes categories of ekphrasis based on their level of engagement with the artwork. These are: "Attributive (naming, allusion, indeterminate marking); Depictive (analogous structuring, description); Associative (artistic styles, mythos/topos)" (Robillard 61). Hecht's "Meditation" elaborates upon "a painting of my own making, with details borrowed from great altarpieces by the likes of Giovanni Bellini and Cima da Conegliano. There are a number of these stunning works in Venice, and I have assembled my own composition out of them, pretty much ad lib" (Hoy 91-2). In this effort the poem encompasses many of Robillard's adjectives, but it is remarkable among his ekphrastic work for omitting the "naming" of the art work. This is because the composition is his own: the poem is an example of what Hollander calls "Notional ecphrasis – or the description, often elaborately detailed, of purely fictional painting or sculpture that is indeed brought into being by the poetic language itself" (4).

In this sense, “Meditation” presents an image that is both unique in its original construction in the language of the poem, and one that intends to present or define a type, or “species,” as Mitchell has it (*Iconology* 10). It contemplates the nature of “what is called a sacred conversation” (*LP* 36).¹² The genre is significant in this poem that is bound up with speech, or the lack thereof (appropriate to a silent artwork), and that scrutinises religious discourse in general. The speaker superfluously states that “There is much here / Worthy of observation” (*LP* 36-7). But observation is a crucially reciprocal process in this poem, wherein the saints look back at the observer and register the “atrocities” made in the name of their God (*LP* 38).¹³ The drama of looking is a subject that is best explored in the ekphrastic mode.

If the image, emerging with varying degrees of tangibility and visuality, is a salient feature of Hecht’s poetry, then the same is true of the visual sense that necessarily accesses images and supplies the metaphor by which their imagined counterparts are understood. Applause for close ocular attention abounds in Hecht’s critical writing. It is expressed reverently in his praise for the work of his friend and contemporary, Elizabeth Bishop. Hecht writes in *Melodies Unheard* that:

Like painters (and it is no accident that Bishop writes about painting, admired painters, and was herself a painter), Bishop often focuses her poems on ocular and empirical knowledge, on the actuality of the visible world. Even when painting itself is not her subject, her poems often concern themselves with the act of inspection. (170)

This position accords with Willard Spiegelman’s contention that American poets of Hecht’s so called middle generation, “look carefully at the world, either natural or

¹² “Sacra conversazione (‘sacred conversation’). Term applied to a type of religious painting depicting the Virgin and Child flanked on either side by saints, which developed during the 15th and 16th centuries, and is associated primarily with the Italian Renaissance” (*Dictionary of Art* 494).

¹³ This poem is subject to detailed analysis in the second chapter.

artistic, and they commend themselves to us by their own attention to external circumstances” (4). Correlates for Bishop’s classic moments of intensive vision in Hecht’s poems tend to evoke the potentially disturbed character of obsessive scrutiny and the “actuality of the visible world,” the horrors revealed in the close-up. In “A Miracle for Breakfast” Bishop notes “a baroque white plaster balcony / added by birds, who nest along the river / - I saw it with one eye close to the crumb” (14). Where the doughy architecture of a (possibly Eucharistic) crumb held close to the eye mirrors the scene it frames, Hecht’s war trauma returns with the image of a soldier as viewfinder, “his chest showing a jagged vacancy / Through which I might admire the distant view” (*EP* 98). This moment, in a poem called “A Deep Breath at Dawn,” offers a sinister literalisation of the convention in English to use the word “frame” with reference to the human body.

Hecht’s fascination with the compulsion to see (compulsion in the sense of desire and of externally imposed necessity), inhabits the space between the literal frame of the painting and the figurative frame that is the context of the violence perpetrated by humankind. The viewing of art images typically comes about through deliberate and consensual exhibition, while the witnessing of violence is usually (not always) an involuntary exposure. A second drama of inspection occurs in Bishop’s “Sandpiper,” about which bird the speaker states, “His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied, // looking for something, something, something” (125). Though “a student of Blake” in its apprehension of the world “in a grain of sand,”¹⁴ the bird’s

¹⁴ The relevant lines from Blake are:
 To see a World in a Grain of Sand
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
 And eternity in an hour.

This is the opening stanza of “Auguries of Innocence” from *The Pickering Manuscript*, 1803 (*Complete Writings* 431). That title is also adopted by Hecht for one of his own poems in *Millions of Strange Shadows*, in which Jacobson detects “an existential uncertainty towards the task of interpreting pictures” (76).

careful study also resembles, according to the speaker who is equally captivated by the bird, a “state of controlled panic” (125). The coexistence of desire and need in the compulsion to look is projected onto the sandpiper in this poem. Hecht offers a variation on its central dictum in “The Venetian Vespers.” Where Bishop’s bird is “looking for something, something, something,” Hecht’s protagonist is compelled to “look and look” (*EP* 247). Crucially, the latter removes (or does not know) the end that justifies the means of his (verbally and physically) repeated looking. He is not especially “looking for something.” The sandpiper’s quarry is unknown to the reader and perhaps to the bird itself, but the aimlessness of the speaker in “The Venetian Vespers” is total, and reflective of his dejected frame of mind. Before that lengthy poem is given full attention, it will be useful to briefly inspect another, also set (for a time) in Italy, which will help to clarify Hecht’s distinction between optical vision and visions in the sense associated with mysticism and the metaphysical, if only in highlighting its ambiguity.

“A Hill,” the opening poem from Hecht’s second collection of verse, begins as follows:

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 visions of saints,
 And perhaps not a vision at all. (*EP* 2)

This phenomenon is classified by a process of elimination that eventually reduces it to the fullness of doubt. It is supplied with various correlates or antitheses which accumulate and then remain to inflect the poem in the absence of any convincing replacement. “Nothing at all” emphasises the exceptional character of this experience, while the negative comparisons to the lofty visions of Dante and the saints work to

curtail the potential supernatural boast, and eliminate any suspicion of religious inspiration. If “not a vision at all,” then this experience is fully enigmatic and more powerful for its being so. It is a product, presumably, of the subconscious and of memory, yet its immersive character distinguishes it from such commonplace mental operations.

If it is not a visionary moment, neither is it one that pivots around something directly and presently seen. The setting for the poem is a crowded piazza with a small market where “Cheap landscapes and ugly religious prints / Were all on sale” (*EP 2*). The street art holds no appeal for this speaker, he is not inclined towards further inspection, and the “colours and noise” of the scene are equally vague (*EP 2*). Yet this abstention from considered looking is displaced by an apparition that is forced upon the speaker. The tourist’s saunter is interrupted “when it happened:”

And it got darker; pushcarts and people dissolved

And even the great Farnese Palace itself

Was gone, for all its marble; in its place

Was a hill, mole-coloured and bare. It was very cold. (*EP 2*)

Hecht dramatises the shift from actual to visionary perception, whereby even the most solid of materials, the most revered of tourist sights, is susceptible to instant dissolution within the psyche. Peter Sacks characterises the vision of “A Hill” as “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” (69). In this way “A Hill” would function as a kind of ritual of initiation, as an opening poem that institutes withdrawal and isolation in preparation for the cultural immersion and social activity

to come in *The Hard Hours* (Sacks 70). The rearrangement of molehill to “hill, mole” amplifies the intrusive and eruptive quality of this incident.

Indeed, the vision ends as abruptly as it commences:

Then prices came through, and fingers, and I was restored

To the sunlight and my friends. But for more than a week

I was scared by the plain bitterness of what I had seen.

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. (*EP* 2-3)

The final realisation of the source of the vision, according to Robyn Creswell, “explains some of the vision’s mystery, but does so by replacing it with another: namely, why should the boy have stood in front of this hill, in the industrial cold, for so many hours?” (23). This non-explanation can be read as a traumatic cover-up for issues of abandonment, but a more productive possible answer to this query is that, like Bishop’s sandpiper, the young speaker is transfixed by the scene he perceives. The view is in fact powerful precisely for its temporal expansiveness: when the speaker is a boy he observes the hill “for hours,” it then resurfaces in adulthood in the vision that “promised to last forever, like the hill” (permanence in geology is here equated with that in memory), subsequently continuing to disturb its participant “for more than a week,” and finally being identified one decade later (*EP* 2-3).

The notion of visions and vision as being temporally promiscuous receives further attention in “The Venetian Vespers.” In this lengthy dramatic monologue an unnamed man visits Venice and elaborates upon his past in disconcerting vacillation

between the psychological and moral imperative to “look and look” in the present tense, and the temptations of the backwards and inwards glance. If “this man, nameless in my poem, in his illness and stoic resolve was a kind of figuration of the city in its decay, its lingering on from greatness to a tourist attraction, yet with an undeniable dignity and beauty for all that” (Hoy 79), then inspection and introspection are in fact allied. Yet the relation between mental images produced as imprints of the external world and those emerging from memory and imagination remains unstable. The poem is a six part study in character, in which the speaker incrementally reveals details of the family drama underlying his desperate and depressed psychology, while touring the sights of Venice in an attempt to assuage it. The family narrative comprises: the sudden death of the mother during childhood, the abandonment, institutionalisation, and death of the father, the *Hamlet*-infused usurpation of the uncle who is likely the real father, and the speaker’s incarceration in a lunatic asylum. Melding biography and art-heavy travel writing, this poem represents a strong affirmative response to Spiegelman’s query, “Does the “I” always interfere with, interrupt, or color the seeing “eye?” (5). No description in “The Venetian Vespers” is objective, all of its sights hinge upon the psychology of the seeing speaker.

The first epigraph of “The Venetian Vespers” is taken from Shakespeare’s *Othello* and begins “where’s that palace whereinto foul things / Sometimes intrude not?” (EP 221). The important concept of sanctuary is invoked here,¹⁵ but this line also refers back to the Farnese “palace” of “A Hill,” whereinto a disturbing image does in fact intrude (EP 2). The quotation may function as an announcement of the strategy of avoiding painful apparitions by paying attention to, or looking for

¹⁵ Sanctuary is defined as a holy place in which, according to medieval Church law, a fugitive was secure “against arrest or violence” (*OED*). The notion of sanctuary in art objects will gain additional relevance in the following chapter.

(“where’s that palace”?), stability in the external world, especially in its long standing and sacred physical structures. A second quotation from *Othello* appears in the fifth section of the poem, containing an apparently contradictory message of the “merciful” capacity of “blindnesses” (*EP* 240). The reference is “I saw it not, though it not, it harmed not me” and it derives from act three, scene three of that play, concerning Othello’s self-professed ignorance of Desdemona’s infidelity, which Iago has manufactured. It is a specifically Venetian instance of the bliss of ignorance, but with the added dimension that the upsetting revelation is not in fact accurate.

The speaker professes to have passed the juncture of innocence, being now fully encumbered with unhappiness that primarily derives from the life events that he has witnessed or come to learn about after the fact. Despite the narrator’s position of knowledge, the reader of the poem is as badly informed as Othello. From its beginning the poem deliberately keeps its reader ungrounded in space and time, as a chain of images replace each other with disorienting velocity and uncover the instability of the categories of present and past.¹⁶ This condition is apparently presented as a gift, since the opening lines claim that “What’s merciful is not knowing where you are, / What time it is,” a sensation that the speaker is not able to appreciate (*EP* 221). There follows a sequence of fragmented and aborted beginnings that celebrate distortions in the image field:

Where to begin? With the white, wrinkled membrane,
 The disgusting skin that gathers on hot milk?
 Or narrow slabs of jasper light at sundown
 That fit themselves softly around the legs
 Of chairs, and entertain a drift of motes,

¹⁶ This is a “heap of broken images” like that invoked in Eliot’s “The Burial of the Dead” from *The Waste Land* (*Selected Poems* 51).

A tide of sadness, a failing, a dying fall? (*EP* 221)

Such images continue to proliferate, and regularly repeat this fascination with layers and visual filters that variously afford windows or obstructions to reality, but also constitute a metaphor for the imperfect communication between humans and their environment. This surfaces among the speaker's guiding anxieties, a cause of his isolation and the hopelessness of renewed contact. Such pleasant possibilities as the suggestive enjambment in the line "fit themselves softly around the legs," are lost to the speaker, who perhaps would identify more strongly with the "disgusting skin" or the doomed notes onto which he projects his "tide of sadness."

In *The Stones of Venice* by John Ruskin, a work of architectural history that is the source of the second epigraph of the poem, the writer's entrance to St. Mark's (which is re-enacted later in Hecht's poem) inspires a poetic flourish that could appropriately describe the opening of "The Venetian Vespers." It proceeds:

Under foot and over head, a continual succession of crowded imagery, one picture passing into another, as in a dream; forms beautiful and terrible mixed together . . . the passions and the pleasures of human life symbolized together, and the mystery of its redemption. (Ruskin 88)

For Hecht's speaker, who eventually decides "Where to begin" and begins his Venetian tour, Ruskin's comment could be modified to indicate that, in addition to symbolising or depicting the mystery of redemption, the images adorning the interior of St. Mark's and the experience of engaging them become a means to some kind of redemption. Confronted with rain falling on a cathedral front and the pavement on which he stands, the speaker intimates that, "To give one's whole attention to such a sight / Is a sort of blessedness" (*EP* 239). This is one half of the deep ambivalence towards vision identified by Willard Spiegelman:

Vision penetrates aggressively; to see *through* something is to dig beneath the surface to its essence. We speak of a cutting glance. But vision also, to turn the phrase, sees us through, by accompanying us and providing something that adequately maintains balance, sanity, presence in—and in the face of—the world. (15)

The sentiment is echoed elsewhere in “The Venetian Vespers,” though it is qualified with the acceptance of the impossibility of genuine redemption through vision. The lyric present tense is suggestive of a ceaseless and regular activity that, in this case, takes on an obsessive character, as the speaker admits “I look and look, / As though I could be saved simply by looking” (*EP* 247). In spite of its accepted futility, this ocular scrutiny is continuous. In his explanation of this pivotal moment in an interview, Hecht brings Simone Weil (hers is the opening quotation) into dialogue with W. H. Auden:

‘One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth that goes almost unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us.’ Surely part of that ‘salvation’ is engendered by a capacity, at least momentarily, to forget ourselves, and fully to attend to something else. . . . Auden also knew that that kind of attention, which he calls ‘prayer,’ can also be an obsessional concern that leads to maniacal behavior. (“Efforts of Attention”)

The dissolution of the ego in the act of inspection is a process that is explored and refuted throughout this poem, both in the permeability of the boundary between the speaker’s past and Venice’s present, and in the landmarks of his own quest for mental tranquillity. Hecht also hints at the power of description as commensurate with that of raw perception, in that “One takes no thought whatever of tomorrow, / The soul being drenched in fine particulars” (*EP* 239). The speaker’s predicament is also of course

that of poets in general (those who articulate “fine particulars”), an observation that Hecht himself made in his reading of Bishop’s “Sandpiper” on the theme of poetic concentration in the face of upheaval (*Melodies Unheard* 171). The sandpiper’s “controlled panic” resembles the “maniacal behaviour” exhibited by the speaker of “The Venetian Vespers” and also that envisaged by Auden.

Within this immersion in visual details resides a further ambivalence. The “wonderfully disfigured” optical illusions of the opening section receive explicit commentary as the fifth part of the poem, directly following those closing lines about “fine particulars,” immediately retracts that faith in vision, beginning:

Seeing is misbelieving, as may be seen

By the angled stems, like fractured tibias,

Misplaced by water’s anamorphosis.

Think of the blonde with the exposed midriff

Who grins as the cross-cut saw slides through her navel. (*EP* 240)

The basic irony here is that sight is employed to comprehend its own fallacy. If “seeing is misbelieving” then the fact that such a conclusion is itself “seen” creates a paradox that first undermines the indexicality of vision, then reinstates the legitimacy of visually accessed knowledge (including that about vision itself). In combination, the two clauses undermine their own logic and characterise the speaker by the impasse that governs his dejection. The selection of imagery is also subtly sinister, where marine vegetation comes to resemble a broken shin bone, and the manmade illusion of the magician’s table also threatens mutilation. His distrust in vision is all-encompassing, not limited merely to distortions created by substances outside of the self: “All lenses – the corneal tunic of the eye, / Fine scopes and glazier’s filaments – mislead us / With insubstantial visions” (*EP* 240). The speaker’s swinging

ambivalence between scepticism and redemption in vision is intensely temporal, alternating as the poem progresses. But this supreme instance of the rejection of sight finds its greatest contrast when vision is directed towards architecture, which is (in the senses of reality and solidity) as far as possible removed from such “insubstantial visions.”

Hecht’s ekphrastic description of the interior of St. Mark’s, and its engagement of the art historical discourse exemplified in the prior description by John Ruskin, does happen to provide a form of sanctuary, if only momentary. This time the protective or violated “palace” of “A Hill” and the *Othello* epigraph is incarnated as “The movie-palace dark” (*EP* 231), which is an uncommon way to describe a church interior that also provides an appropriate metaphorical setting for the cinematically rapid succession of Hecht’s images. Ruskin, at the equivalent moment in his tour of *The Stones of Venice*, states that “the eye must be accustomed for some moments before the form of the building can be traced; and then there opens before us a vast cave, hewn out into the form of a Cross” (88). Hecht’s version directly appropriates Ruskin, but the similarity of the first line draws attention to the contrast in the remainder of both texts:

In time the eye accommodates itself
 To the dull phosphorescence. Gradually
 Glories reveal themselves, grave mysteries
 Of the faith cast off their shadows, assume their forms
 Against a heaven of coined and sequined light. (*EP* 232)

These two eyes become accommodated to divergent experiences: Hecht’s opulent ascension is far removed from Ruskin’s descent into a cave. In this case, revelation (“Glories reveal themselves”) carries its spiritual and its visual baggage. It would

appear that the speaker's bitterness has momentarily evaporated as a result of the sanctuary in the "palace," achieved by his roving and attentive eye. However, St. Mark's is not solely a visual pleasure, as the speaker traverses:

A cool plantation of columns, marble shafts

Bearing their lifted pathways, viaducts

And catwalks through the middle realms of heaven. (*EP* 232)

As well as being visually guided, this period of grace is kinetic in its suggestion of movement along manmade channels, and in the experience of space that architecture among the arts provides most forcefully.

Experiential and visual responses to architecture constitute the prevailing ekphrastic content of "The Venetian Vespers." It is significant in a poem that is emphatically devoted to the visual sense that the majority of the artworks apprehended are also spatial phenomena. Venice, and St. Mark's in particular, offers a sight that is also, crucially, a site. Vision is vital for a body to situate itself in space, in addition to its function in the contemplation of images and scenes. "The Venetian Vespers" extends the cinematic quality of its barrage of image fragments to other shots or takes in which the city is navigated in motion. John Nims points out that "To glide silently toward the cemetery by way of a hospital called the Incurables and then the Street of the Dead is a poetic way to get there; it is not the direct route" (136). Geography, like vision, is distorted in its reflection of the speaker's inner psychology. He travels, at one point, "Across the Braille of pavement" (*EP* 231). The readability of stonework, appropriate to this character and his forebear (it is possible literally to read *The Stones of Venice*), is ironically only accessible to the initiated blind.

Like buildings, art images are specifically sighted phenomena (accessed from a specific position and perspective involving the ocular gathering of primary

information), and also sited (grounded in a physical location and historical reality). In order to claim that for Hecht vision and images pivot on sites as well as sights, and that the two are fundamentally inseparable, it will be useful to review the poet's own turning of that phrase. In an essay "On Rhyme" in *Melodies Unheard*, Hecht states that:

Merrill's stanza pattern . . . is imposed upon an amusing catalogue of quirky reactions to the testing sight (or test-site) of the famous grotto, and with psychological insight reveals, like an inkblot test, more about the observer(s) than the observed. (274)

Hecht's analysis here arguably also reveals more about the observer (himself) than the observed (Merrill's poem). Framed in overtly ocular terms, "sight . . . insight reveals . . . observer," this statement emphasises a visual component that is not especially evident in the stanzas he cites. Hecht also identifies his own favoured technique of investing the act of looking with the capacity to characterise the psychology of the observer.

James Merrill's "The Blue Grotto," upon which Hecht makes that comment, narrates the heterogeneous human responses of a group of tourists visiting that attraction in Capri, and ends thusly:

Thinking his mantra. Jack
 Came out with a one-liner,
 While claustrophobic
 Janet fought off a minor
 Anxiety attack. (Qtd. in *Melodies Unheard* 274)

An "Anxiety attack" is an appropriate response to Janet's claustrophobia in the cave, something that Hecht's speaker in "Vespers" mercifully avoids in Ruskin's "cave" of

St. Mark's. Coping methods are among Merrill's subjects here: alternative responses to the blue grotto in the final stanza are an unspoken "mantra" and a "one-liner," both of which obliquely stand in for poetry and its self-placating effect. The punning classification of the "testing sight (or test-site)," is equally present in Hecht's work as a construction for his visually oriented and spatially located interrogation of culture and history. This fecund locution also involves the testing of the poet's own sense of sight (the accuracy or insight it affords) and, for Hecht especially, concerns sights that are themselves testing in the ethical and psychological sense.

Violent Re-Vision

If the sites of Hecht's images inflect how they are sighted, then attention to the geographical locations that his poems take as their settings is due. In the broadest terms, the poems attending to encounters with visual art are predominately set in Italy (this is evident in the pieces already discussed), while those pertaining to images of violence occur in Germany. However, where the galleries and public edifices of Venice and Rome are precisely locatable, Germany is an obscure and obscured terrain: speakers find themselves merely "outside a German wood" ("More Light! More Light!" *EP* 64), or "somewhere in Germany" ("Still Life," *EP* 211). Jonathan Post notes that "Hecht's wartime letters, in fact, often give as their only address 'somewhere in Germany'" ("Early Anthony Hecht" 122). Being geographically vague, the massive violence of the Second World War intrudes upon Hecht's view of the fund of art on display in twentieth century Europe. The poet accounts for the indivisibility of culture from the history that produces it in *The Hidden Law*, where he states that:

The past is a bewildering amalgam of ingredients, some of which include the greatest attainments of what we prize as our ‘culture:’ the carving of angels on cathedrals, the composing of tragedies . . . But we must be aware that we ourselves are the heirs of all the errors and accomplishments of that past, a past which, if advanced by wisdom, was hindered by folly. (123)

For Hecht it is impossible to reconcile the valued artistic products of civilization with its antagonistic tendencies. The vantage point of his roving vision is the European historical stage that is the test-site for the cohabitation and confrontation of art and violence.

A clear juxtaposition of European images of art and war occurs in the opening stanza of “Dichtung und Wahrheit.” The title of that poem derives from two sources. The more recent is “Dichtung und Wahrheit (An Unwritten Poem),” W. H. Auden’s prose meditation on the writing of love poetry. The second, and more relevant, is the subtitle of Goethe’s autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From my Life: Poetry and Truth*). The allusion to this work anticipates the autobiographical revelation that the speaker of this poem is among those captured in the wartime photograph it describes. It is, additionally, possible to think of the sculpture and the photograph Hecht presents as respective examples of “Poetry and Truth” in visual culture. A further link between Goethe and the proximity of art and war emerges in Hecht’s “More Light! More Light!” which narrates the live burial of two Jews by a fellow death camp inmate, and quotes what are reputed to be Goethe’s last words. The relevance of last words comes to light in a preface Hecht made to this poem at a public reading: the shrine of Goethe (who is the embodiment of German culture) is sited at Weimar, which is also the nearest train station to Buchenwald concentration camp (“Introduction to Reading of ‘More Light! More Light!’”).

The first stanza of “Dichtung und Wahrheit” begins:

The Discus Thrower’s marble heave,

Captured in mid-career,

That polished poise, that Parian arm

Sleeved only in the air,

Vesalian musculature, white

As the mid-winter moon –

This, and the clumsy snapshot of

An infantry platoon,

Those grubby and indifferent men,

Lounging in bivouac,

Their rifles aimless in their laps,

Stop history in its tracks. (*EP* 113)

The classical sculpture, copies of which are on display in Rome, and the wartime photograph, which Hecht’s biography would suggest is taken in Germany, inhabit here a single sentence and unit of thought. It is possible to argue both for their juxtaposition and for their equivalence or assimilation. Paired terms are discernible across the two images in this stanza, and they appear to favour the first: “heave” and “Lounging,” “Captured” and “snapshot,” “poise” and “clumsy,” “polished” and “grubby.” Even Hecht’s language is first tense and graceful, then grounded and spare, in line with its dual subject. Yet the two visual objects, according to the final line, achieve an identical (or collaborative) effect.

About the plastic arts it is conventional to assert that their spatial existence insulates them from the flow of time.¹⁷ The final line corroborates this premise. As a canonised icon of arrested motion (Steiner 41), Myron's Classical *Discus Thrower* is alive to the kind of approach that Hecht is taking. However, it is less regular to claim that an indexical image of participants in one of history's major events also halts the continuation of it ("Stop[s] history in its tracks"). Visual culture occupies a peculiar position as something that can be both divorced from temporal change, and embedded in precisely the history it depicts.

"Dichtung und Wahrheit" is also an accessible model for a defining feature of Hecht's poems: an associate shift in attention from an aesthetically pleasing scene or object, to one of war or violence. Such a shift might also be labelled as a "*peripeteia*," which Hecht defines as "a reversal which is also a reappraisal the reader or member of the audience is forced to go through" (*Obbligati* 164).¹⁸ In this stanza the division is equal, but elsewhere sinister associations surface in a final plot twist, emotional payload, or traumatic afterthought. An initial reading of such poems permits a naïveté unavailable upon repeated perusal, and interpretation occurs retroactively as seemingly unambiguous lines take on altered significance. This is especially true of ekphrastic images that Hecht's verbalisation invests with moral corruption that is not visibly apparent in the artwork (the subject of chapter two). Brad Leithauser writes of "The Deodand," that "Anyone who meets the poem first and the painting only later will likely be struck by an unanticipated innocence in the latter" (6). It would therefore be reasonable to claim that anyone who approaches the painting first and the poem later will likely be struck by an unanticipated element of horror in the latter.

¹⁷ This proposition arrives, through Horace's *Ut picture poesis*, at Lessing, who claims that painting employs "figures and colours in space," where poetry articulates "sounds in time" (131). This opposition of "coexistent" and "successive" signs becomes established in the scholarship of aesthetics, though not without its detractors, among whom Mitchell is included (Lessing 131, *Iconology* 103).

¹⁸ A poem by that title also appears in *Millions of Strange Shadows* (EP 140-2).

Such shifts to subjects of suffering and death occur in many of Hecht's poems, though they do not all arise from art objects. "It Out Herods Herod, Pray You Avoid It" begins as the speaker puts his children to bed but turns on its final line as he wonders, in another time, what would "Have saved them from the gas" (*EP* 68). Likewise, "Still Life" is a pictorial nature poem that is re-contextualised with the final detail, "A cold, wet Garand rifle in my hands" (*EP* 211). "Persistences" considers memory on a winter walk, and terminates once more in a look to the holocaust and "The burning voiceless Jews" (*EP* 213). The final lines of these three poems attempt a poetic effect or peripeteia that is itself violent, producing sudden shocks in imagery that induce a kind of verbal whiplash.

These brief examples contain a shift in either their final stanzas or final lines, and exemplify the concern with finality and termination that surfaces in Hecht's critical writings as well as his poetry. Hecht's explanation of the volta in his introduction to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* claims that the arrangement of images in such poetry works to effect "a sort of 're-vision' or revelation" (6). Hecht's lexical choices here betray his fascination with looking, where "revelation" is charged with its visual and spiritual significance. The manipulation of poetic form to demand "re-vision" has an even greater potential than that which Hecht identifies in the sonnet. Widely considered to be a master of form, Hecht experimented with some of the most obscure and constraining structural templates to this precise end. Specifically, the traumatic and terminal return of painful images is at its most intense in such strict poetic forms as the sestina and the canzone. An example of each will be given presently.

On the subject of the sestina, Hecht writes, "The sevenfold repetitions of the same terminal words does indeed invite a monotony that best accompanies a

dolorous, despairing, and melancholy mood . . . The repeated words, inexorable in their order, seem designed to convey a state of obsession, and of gloomy obsession especially” (*Melodies Unheard* 66).¹⁹ This observation applies to the poet’s own attempts at the form, of which there are two, but the notion of a melancholy obsession that returns at the close of a line or poem is also applicable to his body of work as a whole. Hecht would in fact appear to be obsessed with obsession, placing two poems of extremely strict formal limits in *The Transparent Man*, in the fourth and penultimate positions in the book.

The sestina from that collection is “The Book of Yolek.” The Biblical epigraph to the poem reads “*Wir haben ein Gesetz, / Und nach dem Gesetz soll er sterben*” (*LP* 97). This is taken from John 19:7, and the significance of the German translation is revealed as the poem progresses. By virtue of being in another language, it also distracts attention from Hecht’s other uses of the word “Law” (“Gesetz”), in his critical texts *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* and *The Hidden Law*. The laws operating within poetry, especially those of delineated metrical, rhythmic and stanzaic forms, are enlisted in the poetic expression of the inevitability of death (“according to this Law he must die”). These literary laws serve to comment upon the historical laws that accelerated countless deaths in the twentieth century.

The terminal words of “The Book of Yolek” are monosyllabic, mostly unambiguous, and evoke a pastoral mood. They are “day,” “to,” “meal”, “home,” “walk,” and “camp.” The reader is presented with memories of nature trails and summer camps, until the volta in the third stanza (when “to” becomes “1942”) turns towards “a special camp” of the extermination variety (*LP* 97). That associative leap

¹⁹ Hecht explains that form as follows: “The sestina . . . is composed of six stanzas of six lines each (hence its name) and is usually concluded by a tercet, three lines, each of which contains two of the six terminal words that end the lines throughout the poem. The permutations of these terminal words is rigidly and inflexibly fixed.” (*Melodies Unheard* 67). The sestina can equally be construed as a poetic exercise in the production of multiple images or dissemblances, from a restricted fund of verbal signs.

signals the interpenetration of historical and psychological time to come, and follows the line, “No one else knows where the mind wanders to.” This observation reflects upon the wandering but obsessive workings of the mind that are emulated in the form of the sestina as Hecht conceives it in *Melodies Unheard*. Self-reflexivity is more overtly detectable in the lines, “How often you have thought about that camp, / As though in some strange way you were driven to” (*LP* 97). This admission refers to the driving force that is poetic form, and accords with Hecht’s claim that sestinas tend to “harp on the same sad theme, varying it in certain ways but never departing from it, bound to it by the shackles of those six terminal words” (*Melodies Unheard* 77).

Poetic shackles are highly appropriate to a piece about the afterlives of death camps: the “regulation torments of that camp” also regularly torment a speaker forced to return there seven times over the course of the sestina. This harmony of form and content illustrates Syndey Lea’s generalisation, in the introduction to the only book of critical essays devoted entirely to Hecht, that “There is in Hecht’s vision, to say it too simply, a taut and demanding relation between formality and fate” (xii). The formal structure, around which images of happenings and histories crystallise, is made to account for that content. Lea’s use of “fate” achieves its connotation of fatality in this particular poem, in which mechanised killing finds its correlate in the formal determinism of the structure (“The order in which [the six terminal words] will appear throughout the entire length of the poem is *absolutely determined*” (*Melodies Unheard* 67, my emphasis)). In the sense that the sestina confines its subject to a limited string of line ending words, and conveys a state of mind that is metaphorically imprisoned by that subject, it may be the closest formal equivalent for the “*enclosures terminal and obscene,*” towards which the Nazi box cars also roll in “Apprehensions” (*EP* 159, my emphasis).

The unsettling repetition in “The Book of Yolek” also relates to the titular but intangible protagonist of the poem, who is a ghost. A child inspired by “a memorable photograph, one of the most famous to survive from the Warsaw ghetto” of a small boy held at gunpoint by “unembarrassed soldiers” (Hoy 101), Yolek himself is “killed . . . in the camp” (*LP* 98). This spectral figure is conflated with the prophet Elijah, for whom an empty chair is provided at the table during the Jewish Passover festival (this is the setting for the final rendering of “meal”).²⁰ Yolek is inscribed deeply into the poem. His crucially “unuttered name” is in fact a composite of the final letters of the sestina’s final words (excepting the freighted “camp”): “daY,” “tO,” “meaL,” “homE,” “walK.” (my emphasis).

The wandering repetition of the sestina can be read in this case as a form of poetic haunting. Derrida claims that the subject of ghosts is “A question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*” (11). Yolek reappears in a similar fashion to the ghost in *Hamlet*, a reading of which opens Derrida’s text, exemplified in the stage direction: “*Enter the Ghost, Exit the Ghost, Enter the Ghost, as before*” (11). Derrida argues that people must “learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship” (xviii). By inviting Yolek to sit at the Passover table, Hecht perhaps achieves this goal. However, his ghost does not appear through a voluntary responsibility to memorialise, but rather an inexorable trauma that is projected onto the reader in the direct address, “You will remember, helplessly” (*LP* 98), which once more alludes to the formal conditions of the sestina.

Hecht’s other experiment with restrictive form in *The Transparent Man*, “Terms,” brings the states of terminality and obsession closer to the visual field and

²⁰ For more detail regarding Hecht’s writing from the Jewish perspective, see “Chapter Six: To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century” in Diederik Oostdijk’s *Among the Nightmare Fighters*, Alicia Ostriker’s essay, “*Millions of Strange Shadows: Anthony Hecht as Gentile and Jew*,” and Hecht’s own revealing and extensive study of “*The Merchant of Venice: A Venture in Hermeneutics*,” in *Oblbligati*.

its cultural products. It is a canzone, in which only five line-ending words are employed in a sixty-five line poem, and are, as for the sestina, fixed in their appearance in each stanza. The five words are “peace/piece,” “grace,” “tied/tide,” “groan/grown,” and “close” (*LP* 24). The title draws attention to *terminal* words, and the collective terminal illness diagnosed at the “close” of the poem, that describes the beginning of the end of civilisation. The escalating apocalyptic tone climaxes in a sequence of Biblical disasters, but is anticipated by more recent atrocities. Notably, holocaust references focused on Dutch Jews are sequestered in the verse. A possible reference to Anne Frank is hidden in the opening stanza: “the frank disgrace / Of our littoral, littered world” gains significance only in light of the reference to “invaded attics” three stanzas later, and the semantic field generated by allusions to “Rembrandt’s pain” and “a narrow ghetto’s groan” (*LP* 24-5).²¹ The dominant terminal word in the opening stanza is “close,” and it deals with the satisfying “baroque or plain completion” available to the works of musical, theatrical and literary art in which “all loose ends infallibly are tied,” in addition to the equivalent “completion” in humans that is a euphemism for death (*LP* 24). This emphasis on products of imagination as emblems of denouement is complicated when abstracted to the level of ocularity, as the repeated imperatives “Close your eyes” and “Open your eyes” permit the crystallisation of mental images and the apprehension of on-going atrocities, respectively (*LP* 24-6).

The dream of peace, or completion, represented in a Mantegna nativity scene and in Virgilian *Eclogues*, “has grown / Threadbare, improbable” in the face of inevitable moral decay (*LP* 26). The poem closes with the declaration that:

The stain of our disgrace

²¹ Rembrandt “lived for a long time in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, and he studied the appearance and dresses of the Jews so as to introduce them into his sacred stories” (Gombrich 427).

Grows ominously, a malign, ingrown

Melanoma, softly spreading its dark tide. (*LP* 26)

“The stain of our disgrace” has seeped into the artistic canvas, and spread to the products of culture that used to afford peace or picture moments of genuine humanity. If human savagery involves the images also produced by society, it is imperative at this juncture to establish what exactly constitutes a violent image. The second half of “Terms” offers a wealth of examples, as it displays the “tide / Of violent crime” it describes (*LP* 25). For instance, “tied” receives its most sinister usage in “the raped corpse of a fourteen-year-old, tied / With friction tape” (*LP* 25). The brutality of the human condition is accessed and judged here through the visual sense. If “troops, red-handed, muscle in for the close,” the soldiers in question are literally “red-handed,” owing to the tide of blood being shed, and figuratively so, in the sense of being caught or observed (*LP* 26). “Open your eyes” in such a case becomes a moral imperative.

David Riches’ definition of violence emphasises the factor of witnessing that is at play in Hecht’s poem: “an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses” (qtd. in Schinkel 34). Violence, in Riches’ conception, both hinges on the sense of legitimacy that is disputed by multiple parties (laws according to which certain subjects “must” die), and is crucially also something witnessed (thus apprehended and classified according to visual evidence and criteria). Žižek develops this point in terms of its relationship to the aforementioned legitimacy of violent action as it is enacted by individuals or larger forces, and at various geographical and emotional distances. He claims that:

We are thus all caught in a kind of ethical illusion, parallel to perceptual illusions. The ultimate cause of these illusions is that although our power of

abstract reasoning has developed immensely, our emotional-ethical responses remain conditioned by age-old instinctual reactions of sympathy to suffering and pain that is witnessed directly. This is why shooting someone point-blank is for most of us much more repulsive than pressing a button that will kill a thousand people we cannot see. (Žižek 43)

The interlinking of ethical and perceptual illusions is a significant point, which is taken up in Hecht's "An Overview," in which the speaker, "god-like, in a 707" (*EP* 209), contemplates the view below and reflects:

No wonder the camaraderie
 Of mission-happy Air Force boys
 Above so vast a spread of toys,
 Cruising the skies, lighthearted, free. (*EP* 209)

For Hecht, distanced killing is not only perceived as "much [less] repulsive" than individual combat, but as a "lighthearted" game, played by "boys," with their rhyming counterpart "toys." Distanced perspectives allow violence to be perpetrated by people that do not witness the destruction they cause, as Hecht elsewhere suggests: "Modern warfare is so conducted as to make such confrontations virtually impossible. Bombardiers do not see the faces of their victims" (*Hidden Law* 435).

At this stage in "An Overview" the speaker is reproducing the fallacy identified by Žižek, but in its final stanza, again in the model of the violent shift, the "toys" metaphor is overturned upon closer inspection:

But in the toy store, right up close,
 Chipped paint and mucilage represent
 The wounded, orphaned, indigent,
 The dying and the comatose. (*EP* 210)

Witnessing is only possible “right up close.” Though it may not prevent violence from occurring, close observation at least would allow violence to be identified as such. The speaker in “The Venetian Vespers,” who specialises in looking “right up close,” justifies his hunger for merciful sights by detailing his position in the war, “constrained to bear the wounded and the dead / From under enemy fire, and to bear witness / To inconceivable pain” (*EP* 234). By means of the double entendre on the verb “to bear,” Hecht actively associates violence with the necessary, but potentially futile, act of looking. The speaker in “The Venetian Vespers” is transfixed by one corpse in particular:

He was killed by enemy machine-gun fire.

His helmet had fallen off. They had sheared away

The top of his cranium like a soft-boiled egg,

And there he crouched, huddled over his weapon,

His brains wet in the chalice of his skull. (*EP* 234-5)

Hecht claims that “The actual scenes of violence that are specifically described in my poems almost invariably come out of books. This is not to say they didn't really happen, but they were not things that I personally saw” (“Efforts of Attention”). However, in this superlatively violent instance, “That happened to a friend of mine, a member of my company. I saw it” (Interview with McClatchy). The relative importance of the presence of the witness will be elaborated further, as a condition of responsible and legitimate representation of violence, in the following chapter. But here the aforementioned notion of involuntary exposure acts as a kind of violence through vision. “Behold the Lilies of the Field” deals explicitly with this kind of enforced witnessing. In it, an episode is described on the psychiatrist’s couch, reaching far back in history to the torture and execution of the Roman emperor

Valerian. His torture is “exposed to the view of the whole enemy camp. / And I was tied to a post and made to watch” (*EP* 10). The second line is repeated verbatim nine lines later, then “made to watch” appears again in five lines, and once more in another twenty-three (*EP* 10-12).²² Hecht repeatedly re-focuses his image through this incantation from an observer who suspiciously over-denies his voyeurism, but is also actually the subject of violence conducted through vision.

The torture that is witnessed in this way is of course the apex of this poem’s violence. Schinkel writes that “Forms of extreme violence have been primarily understood as forms of *dehumanization*” (56). This is applicable to the final image of “Behold the Lilies of the Field,” in which the living and suffering emperor is stripped of his humanity and then his insides, to become an iconic art object that represents the violence it also participates in:

A hideous life-sized doll, filled out with straw,
 In the skin of the Roman Emperor, Valerian,
 With blanks of mother-of-pearl under the eyelids,
 And painted shells that had been prepared beforehand
 For the fingernails and toenails,
 Roughly cross-stitched on the inseam of the legs
 And up the back to the center of the head,
 Swung in the wind on a rope from the palace flag-pole. (*EP* 12)

The dehumanisation is completed when the emperor’s eyes are replaced by “blanks,” whereby Valerian transforms from a seeing subject into an object seen. A subsequent form of witnessing takes place as women visit the doll to teach their daughters about

²² This phrase has a variant in “Death the Whore,” in which a memory game for children enacts enforced witnessing and remembrance (“You were allowed to do nothing but look” (*LP* 135)). That poem was made with an image by Leonard Baskin, to whom “Behold the Lilies of the Field” is dedicated.

the male anatomy (*EP* 12).²³ Nancy takes the logic of dehumanisation to its extreme in the claim that:

Violence does not transform what it assaults; rather, it takes away its form and meaning. It makes it into nothing other than a sign of its own rage, an assaulted or violated thing or being: a thing or being whose very essence now consists in its having been assaulted or violated. (16)

This is also true of the emperor's taxidermy in this poem, which illustrates the connection between images and Nancy's notion of violence since, in his terms, "violence . . . always completes itself in an image" (20). Hecht's visual scrutiny of the savagery and creativity that intersect in human civilisation upholds or validates the emphasis within theories of violence upon perspectives, witnessing, and images.

This chapter has been occupied with the diverse manifestations of images in Hecht's poetry, including those conjured purely through verbal signs, those connected to actual pictures, and those brought about through violence (or brought about violently). It is not coincidental that so many of Hecht's poems about art and violence overlap. These last confrontations between images and suffering, pain, and death, beg a number of questions: What are the dangers that images pose? What harm is done in, to, and by them? Do they concurrently offer any kind of respite or remedy? And to what extent can they be said to be living or dead? Unequivocal answers to these queries are not forthcoming, but in posing them to Hecht's poems the remainder of this thesis intends to interrogate the relative capacity of the different forms of poetic images to engage violence. The discussion here of some of Hecht's observations about the relation of vision to revelation and the notion of sanctuary, prefaces his

²³ A precedent for the installation of false eyeballs as an occasion for spectatorship is contained in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which part of the dialogue of "The Burial of the Dead" runs, "Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!" (*Selected Poems* 52).

explosion of the refuge offered by visual art in his fully ekphrastic and historically engaged poems. This will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter Two

The Ekphrastic Shield Contested

Classical Precedents

The verbalisation of visual art within a literary text, known as ekphrasis, has sustained its popularity in the poetry of the twentieth century. Hecht himself concedes how strong “the painterly partiality [has] become in our modern era among poets” (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 21). The ekphrastic mode has been portrayed, however, as a commonplace literary exercise that is perhaps devoid of serious content. Murray Kreiger states that, “For medieval rhetoricians, it stood for everything extraneous, detachable, and literally *inconsequential*” (6), while Stephen Cheeke suggests that “there is a laziness in contemporary poets who discover in art a subject ready-made (and a fashionable one to boot)” (2). Yet, far from constituting some kind of frivolous set-piece, it could be that the ekphrastic image, for Hecht, affords an “individual, rewarding way to dwell upon the special horrors of the age” (Leithauser 4).²⁴ His work frequently returns to historical violence through art images.

Hecht’s is not merely a contemporary political critique: recourse to the atrocities of the past (and of fiction, the bible, and other sources) typically yields fresh perspectives on the history that was unfolding in his lifetime, and permits reflection upon lessons learned or not learned in the interim. Encounters with visual art objects are elucidated in this context of violence, exhibiting what Norman Williams considers to be Hecht’s “conviction that ethics and aesthetics cannot be unbound” (36). From antiquity onwards the ekphrastic mode was generally held to constitute a digressive pause or shield from action that is specifically confrontational, in the sense of

²⁴ This remark refers generally to a tendency among recent poets to find a unique mode of response to history. Leithauser does not cite ekphrasis as an example.

hostility, and in the sense of the forced encounter of poet and reader with pertinent or painful issues. Arguing against the notion that the ekphrastic pause in narrative time has a protective function, shielding characters and readers against personal injury and global atrocity, this chapter will contend that Hecht's work reinstates the moral and historical relevance of visual art in poetry. This eventually necessitates an inquiry as to the responsibility of the artist or poet to produce such images (in the first place, and in an appropriate manner).

Images are at once the residue or record of history, and divorced from it as agents of stasis.²⁵ Ekphrastic images in particular are therefore emblems of interrupted (or stilled) temporalities, at the same time as they may interrupt the narrative progression of a literary artwork. This is because, as Mitchell summarises the hegemonic understanding of the so-called rival arts since Lessing, "Poetry is an art of time, motion, and action; painting an art of space stasis, and arrested action" (*Iconology* 48). It is widely proclaimed that stasis is a defining characteristic of visual art objects,²⁶ and that some trace of this quality is transferable to literature. If poetry directs its attention to pictures, or if pictures are somehow verbalised in a text, then it is possible for that writing to emulate and discuss a pause in narrative time. The crucial but contradictory implications of this notion are the protective potential of a respite from time and action, and the threat of death underlying the notion of permanent stillness.

Running parallel to the concept of ekphrastic refuge from the passage of time, the safety conferred in, on, and by art objects in general also has its partisans. The tradition of artistic security, according to Heffernan, has its origin in "the birth of the public museum, which aims at once to preserve the history embedded in works of art

²⁵ This assertion was explored in relation to Hecht's "Dichtung und Wahrheit" in the previous chapter.

²⁶ Hecht himself observes, "Painting, by its very nature, is only able to present its subject in a state of absolute rest" (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 6).

and to protect those works *from* history, from the ravages of time” (93). Outside of the gallery, art images offer security in “the notion of palladium as the protection afforded by the force of art serving as an empowered surrogate of divine presence” (Krieger xvi).²⁷ Artworks are both safeguarded, and represent a safeguard for the history they contain and the communities that identify with them.

Before the tradition of ekphrastic refuge is traced and then brought into confrontation with Hecht’s poems, it is necessary to examine the notions of interrupting and interrupted temporalities in more detail. It is claimed that the only recourse available to the plastic arts to overcome their condition of stasis would be the isolation and depiction of “a moment in the action [which is the subject of the painting or sculpture] that revealed all that had led up to it and all that would follow. This is the so-called pregnant moment” (Steiner 40). The pregnant moment simultaneously implies movement beyond stillness, and draws attention its very impossibility. One poem of Hecht’s is especially occupied with the pregnancy of arrested motion.

Though it is not ekphrastic as such, “Still Life” draws stillness in paintings and stillness in war into conversation. According to Christopher Ricks, this poem “pictures what the French language stiffens into *nature morte*. In Hecht’s hands, this title is alive to life and death, and far-from-incidentally it constitutes a memento (*vivere* and *mori*) of how painterly this poet is” (111). This assessment begs the question: what about this poem renders it painterly? The title alludes to an artistic genre, but that is the only direct reference to pictures. The poem is picturesque in its subject matter and treatment of nature, but the stasis Hecht represents and meditates upon is the principal carrier of the pictorial identification. The temporality of the

²⁷ The concept of the palladium involves the creation and exhibition of a carved or painted image in order to symbolically protect a community (Kreiger xvi). This activity, common in ancient Greece and Rome, is similar to the concept of the totem that will be discussed in the following chapter.

poem is one of poise and anticipation, suggestive of the pregnant moment that is not typically applicable to the genre of still life painting, in which the most likely narrative is that of decay.

With “Things are as still and motionless throughout / The universe as ancient Chinese bowls” (*EP* 221), Hecht references the stillness of Keats’ ekphrastic “Ode to a Grecian Urn” as well as the lines, “as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness” from Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (*Complete Poems and Plays* 117). The peculiar temporality in the intertext from Eliot is described by Kreiger as a “forever-now movement,” which involves both a pause in motion and the perpetuation of it (“still / Moves”) (268). The paradox of frozen action as it appears in Keats’ “Ode” revolves around the lovers depicted on the urn: although “she cannot fade,” it is true also that “never, never canst thou kiss” (209-12). Hecht’s description of the situation in “Still Life” as “still and motionless” suggests peace and rest in the midst of conflict (the speaker is a soldier on a potential battlefield), but in the light of these anterior texts, the comparison to the “Chinese jar” confers a sense of infinite and unending tension.

The vibrating stillness and taut anticipation projected onto dewed cobwebs and bending grass are mingled with the remnants of past experience (the “visitant ghost” of the fog), and more explicit looks to the future (“All that is yet to come” (*EP* 221)). For a poem titled after an artistic genre devoted entirely to the present tense (devoid of narrative), Hecht’s speaker constantly turns his vision backwards and forwards as a potential coping mechanism for the tension of the situation that only becomes evident at the poem’s close. It is a war poem and, according to Hecht:

As near to being a direct personal account as anything that I’d written. . . . At certain moments in the war, in periods of actual combat, there would be these

moments when nothing was happening, and you could just see nature in its innocence and its beauty. (“Efforts of Attention”)

Hecht’s account frames the poem as a respite from violence, rather than an imprisonment in the stasis of the present. The bucolic idyll conjured in the opening of the poem is likewise conventionally associated with escapism.

However, with the materialisation of the personal pronoun in the fourth stanza, human frames of meaning accumulate around pastoral observations. The terminology employed here is ambiguously military, as the speaker labels the hint of fate immanent in this landscape as a “code” (*EP* 221). Other codified intimations, of violence in particular, are available in this poem: “cautionary spring-tight hesitation” refers both to the promise of spring as it is locked in winter, and to the mechanics of a gun such as that held by the speaker. Equally, “polished darkness” and “glints of silver” on the lake provide flashes of gunmetal in the dark, while a “cobweb” is a symbol of strategic imprisonment as well as of the intricacy of beauty in nature (*EP* 221). As part of the catalogue of suspended or restrained actions in this poem, the speaker states, “nor does the trout / Explode in water-scrolls” (*EP* 221). At this frozen moment in time, the explosion of shells and mines is possible but, like the bombastic activity of fish in the lake, it does not occur.

The poem, despite the stillness it describes, has a distinct temporal development that is apparent in its line-ending words. These begin in a pastoral or gothic vein (“ghost,” “lake,” and “dawn” (*EP* 221)), resembling the nocturnal isolation and dark sublimity of a Caspar David Friedrich landscape (contrary to the genre alluded to in the title of the poem). Subsequently, the natural world of the “trout,” “wet,” and “grass,” is subject to human incursion with “net” and “caught” (*EP* 221). In the final stanza the rhyme pattern eventually produces political pairings,

with “intense” and “events,” “decree” and “Germany,” and “commands” with the “hands” which clutch the pivotal rifle (*EP* 221). The poem ends on this promise of action, and of orders to come. The intimated trauma of this moment and its un-narrated completion (presumably in battle) confers a third possible meaning upon the title: “Still Life,” being that state occupied by the speaker who experiences life still, a survivor who is by definition still alive.

The final stanza recycles the phrase “Just before dawn” from the first, where it was prefaced by “Tennysonian calm” (*EP* 211). Its repetition is a temporal check, whereby despite the progression of the poem (and its gradually politicised rhyming nouns), the time of day has not changed. The poem is relocated from its setting in the Romantic wilderness to the terrain of war. The final line, “A cold, wet Garand rifle in my hands,” transfers the features of the setting (“cold” and “wet” are both used previously with reference to climatic conditions), to the object that reveals the cause of this nocturnal vigil (*EP* 221). By correlating this picturesque and motionless setting with the instrument of death that is literally able to “Still Life,” in a twisted moment of pathetic fallacy, Hecht’s meditation upon painterly and deadly stasis comes full circle. In this way, it is plausible to accept Jonathan Post’s assertion that, “the connection of the genre of still life paintings with death, [is] the great unspoken subject of the poem” (“Early Anthony Hecht” 121), especially since nothing is in fact spoken during “This silence so impacted and intense” (*EP* 221).

Hecht’s oeuvre counts among its great unspoken subjects the connection of art images with death, but also with violence. This relationship, for Hecht, consists in a challenge to the assumption that ekphrasis prevents death and excludes the violence that brings it about (both in its non-confrontational choice of subject matter and in the temporal pause afforded by the description of a static, spatial object). That

assumption is widely expounded in theoretical writing about semiotics and the interart nexus, and will be elaborated upon presently.

Wendy Steiner contends that “the translation of temporal flux into the stasis of the visual arts saves action from the impermanence and death that all time-objects suffer. The ephemeral is permanently fixed, becoming a hypostasis of ephemerality” (41). The paradox remains that, within an ekphrasis, the human participants or “time-objects” depicted in the artwork are immortal, but their permanence is characterised precisely by the infinite extension of their ephemerality.

Murray Krieger extrapolates this possibility beyond the respite from time and its concomitant, death, to conceive of ekphrasis as a refuge from the violent action of a personal affront or the violence that is a general condition of existence. He treats this kind of mimesis as a:

Would-be palladium, a shield against invasion from outside, a sealing off from weapons that would enter the unprotected body. It thus would shut out the consequences of the world’s actions, the world and its actions conceived as unremitting warfare. The shield, like *art conceived as a shield* and as palladium, secures the soldier (reader) in his separateness. As he holds it in front of him, it bears with artful decoration on its face a likeness that, as magic protection, keeps off the world and its threatening dangers.” (Krieger xvi, my emphasis)

Krieger here permits ekphrastic safety, which is typically offered to the figures depicted in pictures and poems, to also protect the relentlessly endangered figure of the “soldier (reader).” A further extension of the refuge in art outside of the picture frame is to be found in Lacan’s explanation of “the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting” (101). This involves the process whereby a painter “gives something for the

eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons" (Lacan 101). In combination, these assertions testify to the simultaneous protection and disarmament of the viewer of pictures or reader of ekphrases. However, the appearance of "weapons" in both quotations signifies two things. First, despite their proclaimed safety, discussions of pictures and their ekphrastic reincarnations regularly return to the threat of violence implied in any reference to its prevention. This feature is evident in the "Garand rifle" that makes its appearance in "Still Life" (*EP* 211). Second, the entire body of ekphrastic theory is inflected or possibly prejudiced by its dependence on the original ekphrastic precedent of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* of Homer.

The notion of the protective pause afforded by ekphrasis crystallises around the figure of the shield. Shahar Bram makes a typical pronouncement about the classic example: "In terms of Achilles' plight at the time he receives the shield, ekphrasis protects us by creating a new reality in which time stands still and death is replaced by the immortality of the art object" (374). The context of Homer's ekphrasis is that Achilles, abstaining from fighting in the Trojan war after a dispute with his Achaean leader, is without armour since his companion Patroklos borrowed it, and was subsequently killed and stripped by Hektor. In that "he refused himself to ward ruin from them [the Achaeans]" (*Iliad* 18.450), Achilles' hiatus from battle is itself a refusal to shield. This refusal of violence is revoked upon his receiving this new armour. The description comes at the moment when Hephaestos begins to craft a replacement shield as a favour to Thetis, Achilles' divine mother and an onlooker in the workshop. With it, Achilles will return to the fray to avenge his friend in his brutal *aristeia* (period of supremacy in battle). Following the hero's death, and the conclusion of the *Iliad* itself, Odysseus and Ajax will dispute over the inheritance of

the shield and armour, and Ajax will consequently kill himself (these events are narrated in *The Fall of Troy* by Quintus Smyrnaeus).

Because this lengthy ekphrastic set-piece (*Iliad* 18.478-608) interrupts the narrative of the Trojan war in order to admire a work of artistic beauty and virtuosity, “the shield has been read as the embodiment of an ‘idealised temporality’ and a ‘respite . . . from the pressures of reality.’” (Heffernan 11). This is plausible because the image depicts seasonal shifts in the natural and agricultural worlds, scenes of urban life, dancing, the ocean, and war, among various other phenomena. The standard interpretation is that the shield represents the entire world and the whole range of human activity, whereby “the entire action of the *Iliad* becomes a fragment in the totalizing vision provided by Achilles’ shield” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 180).²⁸ As such a window to peace and a context that decentralises war, the literal shield also lives up to its figurative significance. It literally shields Achilles, and it shields the reader from war (if momentarily). Further, Mitchell claims that the “reader’s position of perceptual and interpretive freedom” at the side of the artist during the ekphrasis, “is a utopian site that is both a space within the narrative, and an ornamented frame around it, a threshold across which the reader may enter and withdraw from the text at will” (*Picture Theory* 178). Whether or not this utopia functions in practice, it is the model for the notion of ekphrasis as a shield.

However, this distraction or respite from battle is not without its violent incursions. The scenes of the city at war (*Iliad* 18.510-40) and of the legal case (18.496-509) are incomplete, not in terms of a finished piece of work (the shield is described as it is being made but the vignettes are presumably presented upon their completion), but in their lack of resolution. Both conflicts are paused, as is the

²⁸ This is also suggested by Krieger (xv), and Hecht: “the artist’s function as a celebrant of all existence” (*Hidden Law* 425).

invasion of Troy, but they are therefore unending, according to the logic of the “forever-now movement” (Krieger 268). This is a founding instance of the paradoxical nature of artistic stasis. With reference to lines 18.585-6, in which herdsmen fend off lions from their livestock, Heffernan astutely writes:

Once again, a passage of insistent movement and violent action concludes on a note of intensely charged *stasis*. Like the soldiers earlier, the dogs take their stand (*istamenoï*), but this time it is not a battle stand. It is a stand-off, a moment of violence indefinitely suspended as the dogs hover between charging and fleeing, rigid with apprehension. (20)

Not only does the shield depict the kind of conflict it participates in (and supposedly protects the bearer or reader from), it testifies to the universality and intransience of violence, where conflict pervades even agricultural activities, and the stand-off continues indefinitely.

Hecht himself takes up the figure of the shield in his translation of Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*, in collaboration with the classicist Helen Bacon. That play, covering a short section of the Oedipus family saga, which the translators term “a story of violence and wrath from beginning to end” (*Seven* 4), is almost entirely occupied with ekphrastic description. As though the play itself were a shielding pause from the suffering of the rest of the story, it narrates the attempted invasion of Thebes by one of Oedipus’ children (the other currently rules the city), through a series of descriptions of the shields that seven prominent attacking warriors display. None of the fighting takes place on stage: a messenger describes these devices to Eteocles (the current king), Eteocles makes comment, and then he proposes a suitable opponent from his own ranks. The ordering of the shields effects a rising tension (ending in the

duel between the two brothers, in which both are reported to be killed), yet the repetitive pattern is formulaic.

This evasive structure and its linguistic expression are implicated in the shielding process, a comment about which Hecht translates as, “the masking metal riddle to ward off stones and spears” (*Seven* line 848). The apotropaic figures on the shields displace the actual conflict, and are doubly defensive. Likewise, the play mentions gates, fortresses, and shields, but none of the clamour of offensive weaponry: “I hear at the gates a clanging of brazen shield / ... defend this fortress of seven gates” (*Seven* lines 195-200). Within the play the “clanging of brazen shield” is its recurrent ekphrastic verbalisation. The audience may hear about the shields but they witness no violence. The descriptions themselves principally serve to include the fearsome and threatening images expected of a play about siege warfare, and to characterise Eteocles in his ironic refutation of the prophetic possibilities of the images upon the shields:

Blazons don't wound.

Crests and bells lose their sting, without spears.

And this midnight, shining with heavenly stars

On the shield that you speak of,

Perhaps with dark folly will be an oracle for someone. (*Seven* lines 485-9)

The shield is here an ambiguous symbol of protection for its bearer, perhaps even prophesying his own death. Hecht's translation of *Seven Against Thebes* stages the possibility of violence occurring through art, even as that art attempts to evade or pause such suffering in the literary work.

Hecht's re-evaluation of these classical precedents unfolds primarily through his relationship with another Hellenocentric poet. W. H. Auden's “The Shield of

Achilles” rehearses the ekphrastic episode in which Thetis oversees Hephaestus’ craftsmanship in the *Iliad*. This poem alternates buoyant stanzas in which Thetis “looked over his shoulder” for pleasant scenes, classical clichés, and rituals that have no place in contemporary warfare (206-8), and stanzas which, in Hecht’s words, “represent the pitiless and impersonal world of modern warfare and its unrelieved aftermath” (*Hidden Law* 427). This refers to moments that casually depict extreme violence, “That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third” (207). Auden is precisely reversing the expectation that ekphrasis will constitute a pleasant digression from the subject of war, and the reader, like optimistic Thetis, is actually treated to “Quite another scene” (206). In this re-working, in which the myth of classical heroism alternates with images of the kind of modern conflict in which shields have become obsolete, the art viewer is forcefully confronted with suffering and desolation. The following lines are reminiscent of Hecht’s moment of enforced witnessing in the torture tale of “Behold the Lilies of the Field:”

A crowd of ordinary decent folk

Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke

As three pale figures were led forth and bound

To three posts driven upright in the ground. (Auden, “The Shield of Achilles”
207)

These still and silent figures are obedient to their material form as sculpted depictions on a shield, but Auden’s description departs entirely from his Homeric source material, and from the ekphrastic convention of a distraction from pain.

The necessity of looking at suffering as well as at art is examined more closely in Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts.” All of the humans featuring in the poem and its picture (principally Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus*) divert their gaze away from the

death of Icarus that takes place in the background (“everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster” (87)). The poem is about the repercussions and significance of *not* looking. All sentient beings are equipped with an (usually idle) purpose or unspecified destination, “the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” (*EP* 87). The painting supposedly illustrates the Flemish proverb that “no plough comes to a standstill because a man dies” (*Hidden Law* 100). In the *Iliad*, also, ekphrastic ploughs cast in metal are continually “driving . . . back and forth” (18.547). But the “innocent behind” of the horse also anticipates Thetis’ naïve position behind Hephaestus’ back, and invokes its opposite in the frontal guilt associated with morbid voyeurism, which is incomparable with the guilt involved in not looking.



Breughel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c. 1558).

Hecht’s writing on this poem associates it with painted “religious scenes which exhibit indifferent or preoccupied people adjacent to dramatic religious events” (*Hidden Law* 99). There is an artistic precedent for ignoring pain, mainly in paintings on the subject of martyrdom, although Hecht argues that that tradition hopes to

“inspire admiration for fixity of faith in the face of the most horrible and obstinate persecution” (Hoy 59). Here the “delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing” but “Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on,” has its correlates in the gallery visitors that include the ekphrastic speaker (87). This particular gallery is located in Brussels, a city that was threatened by the Nazis when the poem was composed in December 1938 (McClatchy, *Poets on Painters* 127). Auden suggests that this potential disaster is not one that should be “turn[ed] away” from. It is this relation between viewing art and facing atrocity that Hecht develops in his Auden-indebted ekphrastic verse.

Refuge Revoked in Three Paintings

Hecht’s concern with visuality and the temporal frames of art objects extends into his interrogation of pictures as objects of safety. His views on the subject are put forth in *The Laws of the Poetic Art*, in reference to J. M. W. Turner:

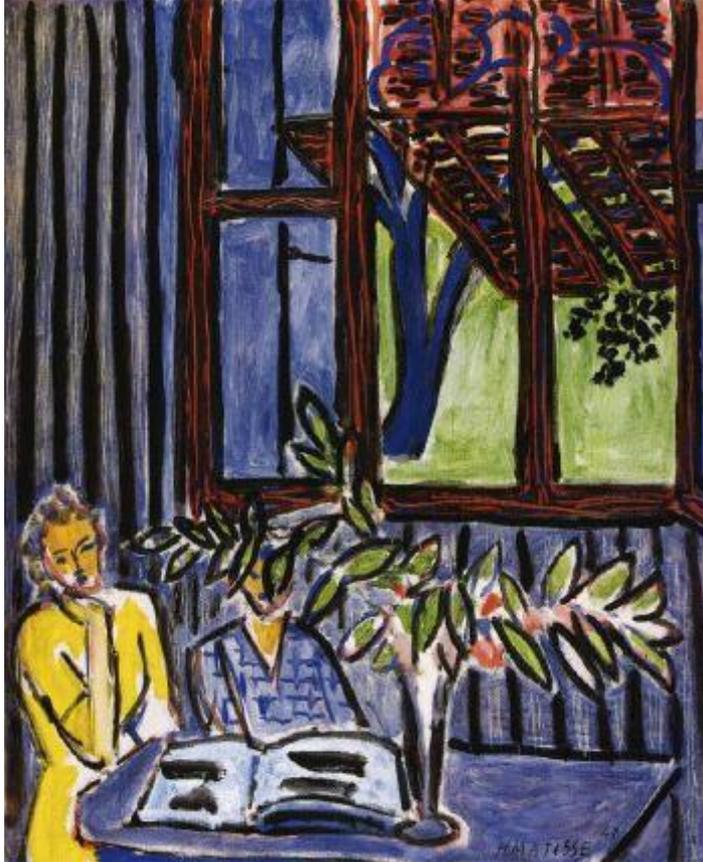
His mother dies insane when he was in his twenties, and it is possible that he sought the *refuge in painting* that can be provided by acute attention to the visible world, which is, in the very nature of things, a constant obsession with the present tense, and a purposeful disregard of past and future. (26, my emphasis)

The optical dimension of “acute attention to the visible world” is explored thoroughly in “The Venetian Vespers,” while “Still Life” examines the relative safety of “the present tense.” But this issue is carried in another direction in Hecht’s ekphrastic verse. His poetic presentation of “refuge in painting,” is rather a critique, and one that is wedded to his exhibition of human cruelty in divisive moments in history.

The piece that best engages Hecht's comment on Turner is "Matisse: Blue Interior with Two Girls – 1947," since that poem hones in on another escape artist. It is a self-contained ekphrasis confined within the borders of an existing picture, that pivots around the relationships of interior to exterior suggested in the title of the painting. However, the lengthy epigraph provides critical and contextual distance beyond its frame. That paragraph from Robert Hughes details the relative seclusion of Henri Matisse from the dramatic political events of the era in which he lived. This assertion is not involved specifically with this picture, but Hecht's inclusion of the date of the painting (two years after the Second World War) brings that context into the foreground. Hughes contends that "*he lived through some of the most traumatic political events of recorded history, the worst wars, the greatest slaughters, the most demented rivalries of ideology, without, it seems, turning a hair*" (LP 166). This would suggest that the poem is about Matisse, the colon in the title signalling an explanation of the man via his painting.

Philip Hoy quotes the artist's notebooks in his interview with Hecht as further evidence of this reputation for escapism, in which Matisse writes, "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter" (Hoy 116). If that is his artistic philosophy, then his life philosophy, as interpreted by Hughes, accords closely with it. Interiority is the grounding principle of Hughes' subsequent remarks that "*His studio was a world within a world*" (like the room described here, characterised by its planetary combination of blues and greens), and that the artist "*produced images of comfort, refuge*" (LP 166). This "refuge," appearing in Hecht's writing on Turner and selected by him for the preface to this poem, represents the position of the artist divorced from historical responsibility that the poet's ekphrases attempt to expose or counteract. The poem, however, takes up

the question of interiority and seclusion without relating it to war and violence (“*there is no trace of them in his work*”). The connection relies entirely upon the title and epigraph.



Matisse, *Blue Interior with Two Girls* (1947).

“Matisse” has a bipartite stanza structure, the first being concerned with the “Outside” that is its first word, and the second with its opening, “Within” (*LP* 166). Containing the terms “shadow,” “shadows,” “shade,” “tanned,” “gnomon,” and “light fails,” the first stanza narrates the encroachment of the outside realm upon the interior it surrounds (*LP* 166). Hecht is concerned with the effect of external light sources and the partitioning objects that obscure and obstruct their rays. This is a situation in which causality abounds: things are illuminated, shaded, and even tanned by others, so that nothing exists in isolation and the boundary between inside and outside is fully permeable from the outset. Despite its visible predominance in the actual painting, the liminal space occupied by shutters and tree branches has no stanza dedicated

especially to it. Hecht's explanation of the poem acknowledges a juxtaposition of temperatures in the colour contrast of inside to out, including the red shutters, and makes a historical leap, "From the opposition of heat and coolness it is but a step to the double-vision of Keats' Grecian Urn, where the war, and appetitive life is pictured but unfelt, where life and art are juxtaposed" (Hoy 117). In the light of this interpretation of another ekphrastic forebear in which "war" is "unfelt," to say that "Outside is variable" in the context of Matisse's supposed isolation and insulation from world history is highly euphemistic (*LP* 166).

The move indoors to the "cool blue perfect cube of thought" (*LP* 166), following the stanzaic break, is aligned with an interiorising trajectory towards the cerebral as opposed to the visible. The concept of "refuge" resurfaces here with the "retreat" and "solaces" offered indoors, during the "summer" when the light is at its strongest and "tanning," or worse, is liable to occur (*LP* 166). The titular "Two Girls" then make their appearance in an image that is ekphrastically self-referential, being a verbal comment upon a pictorial depiction of written text: they examine "an open book / Where they behold the pure unchanging text. . . . tearless in its permanence" (*LP* 166). Permanence, solitude, and reprieve from historical trauma are now applied to the temporal medium of language, abstracted to its graphic form in books. The book is "tearless in its permanence," with reference to the tearing of pages as to the physiological tears that were previously given the epithet of "inevitable," but now are expunged by the girls' immersion in the book (*LP* 166). The non-participation of the girls, and that of the artist rendering them, induces an evacuated temporality whereby they avoid the "*brief* sad ambitions of the flesh" (my emphasis) and other, more painful, transient experiences (*LP* 167). They are "beyond reach" in the room, as Matisse himself is perceived to be. Yet "Deep in their contemplation the two girls, /

Regarding art, have become art themselves” (*LP* 167). The girls seek refuge in the literary artwork and thereby seclude themselves from the activity “Outside” to the extent that they become as divorced from historical time as the static “unchanging” painting they appear in. Hecht frames the experience of the girls as an analogy for Matisse’s studied ignorance of “troubling or depressing subject matter,” or the atrocities of his time, through art.

This is an instance of questionable “refuge in painting” for the artist as his painted subjects. The issue is complicated further in “Meditation,” which focuses on the relative historical participation of painted persons in a situation where sound and speech interact with images (this is made possible in the ekphrastic mode). “Meditation” is subdivided into three sections. The opening part prefigures the ekphrastic description of an imagined Renaissance painting of a sacred conversation,²⁹ in its discussion of the moment in which the “lunatic monologue[s]” of individual instruments heard as an orchestra tunes up, are disentangled into a “conversation” that is “smooth and intelligible” (*LP* 35). The harmonic orchestral metaphor then “disintegrates” as its counterpart in the simile, the “garbled voices” of a cocktail party, overwhelms the stanza with auditory chaos (*LP* 35). The volume decreases in the second part of the poem (before total silence descends in the third), in which the location shifts inside a cathedral where:

There still remain artesian, grottoed sounds
 Below the threshold of the audible,
 The infinite, unspent reverberations
 Of the prayers, coughs, whispers and *amens* of the day,
 Afloat upon the marble surfaces.

²⁹ A sacred conversation that Hecht himself invented. It does not exist, but is inspired by the altarpieces of Bellini and da Conegliano (Hoy 91). *The Dictionary of Art* states in its entry on the “sacra conversazione,” that it is “distinguished by an aura of stillness and *meditation*” (494, my emphasis).

They continue forever. Nothing is ever lost. (*LP* 36)

Sound understood in this way is permanent and irrevocable, and that fact is rendered sinister by Hecht's use of "reverberations" (also "reverberating" in part three (*LP* 38)), a word that is explicitly defined in "Apprehensions" in the following way: "Reverberations (from the Latin, *verber*, / Meaning a whip or lash)" (*EP* 158). This intimation of violence gains significance in the final stanza of the poem.

The third section, longer than its predecessors in each of its two stanzas, addresses the painting that is the centrepiece in this possible sanctuary of the gallery-cathedral. In it, the Madonna and child are flanked by saints, including by the martyred St. Sebastian, John the Baptist, Jerome and Francis, and all are silently sound-tracked by "A small seraphic consort of viols and lutes" that recall the initial musical arrangements of the poem (*LP* 36-7). The first thing "Worthy of observation" is the fact, both dictated by the painted medium and inferred from the expressions of the figures, that "No one in all the group seems to be speaking" (*LP* 37). This is "Meditation" in the sense of a silence associated with transcendence, involving both the figures, exhibiting "childlike concentration" and "deep reflection" (*LP* 37), and viewer that meditates upon the picture.



Bellini, *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (c. 1487).

Yet, the poem here becomes conspicuously audible. “The company, though they have turned their backs / To all of this, are aware of everything” (*LP* 38). The company of saints are aware, in particular, of the noise emitted by their painted avian companions, and the footfall and prayers “whirled” in the second part (*LP* 36). The constant aural attention paid by the painted group may constitute the reason why “Nothing is ever lost.” To their helpless record keeping “is added a final bitterness:”

That their own torments, deaths, renunciations,
 Made in the name of love, have served as warrant,
 Serve to this very morning as fresh warrant
 For the infliction of new atrocities.
 All this they know. Nothing is ever lost.
 It is the condition of their blessedness

To hear and recall the recurrent cries of pain. (*LP* 38)

The saints absorb all of the sounds of the universe, especially the “recurrent cries of pain” emitted when violence is committed in the name of their God. This is a similar condition to that projected upon the saints in Bellini’s “Transfiguration” in “See Naples and Die,” wherein “Their lowered eyes indicate that, unseeing, / They have seen everything, have understood, / The entire course of human history” (*LP* 47). Instead of images of suffering and atrocity (like those “seen” in “See Naples,” and that of Sebastian’s “acupuncture” in the preceding stanza (*LP* 37)), it is their audible reverberations that are not “ever lost,” in accordance with the permanence of the art object. These sounds are parsed into the discourse of the sacred conversation. The saintly observers, taking note of “all the world’s woven woes” and also “looking straight at the viewer,” are the ultimate martyrs in the sense that they never flinch from “atrocities.” This is the opposite position to that occupied by Matisse and his “Two Girls.”

That the speaker in “Meditation” projects an admission of responsibility upon the depicted saints, and upon religion in general, but actually shields the reader from the content of the “torments, deaths” that are merely labelled (*LP* 38), achieves one of Žižek’s objectives in the processing of violence. He advises, “to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts” (Žižek 1). Following the break between stanzas, the painting in its acoustic setting is freighted with the ethical significance of its “background.” This is also an instance of the shift from art to violence that characterises many of Hecht’s poems. In the elaboration of the content of a pictorial mainstay that is premised on speech, but necessarily refuses to supply it

(owing to its non-verbal medium), Hecht is able to bring art and suffering into poetic “conversation.”

The relation between art and violence is staged to dramatic effect in another of Hecht’s ekphrastic poems, entitled “The Deodand.” This work casts its opening glance into a room in which exotically costumed French women appear to be recreating an orientalist painting (“by Ingres or Delacroix” (*EP* 188)), before launching into a politically engaged tirade against their feminised recreation of Maghrebian conquest. Sixty lines in to the poem it is parenthetically revealed that this scene is “(Reported here with warm, exacting care / By Pierre Renoir in 1872)” (*EP* 189). The division between the two stanzas initiates a re-contextualisation of this Parisian painting to the war for Algerian independence from France between 1954 and 1962 (Maran 1).³⁰ The second stanza narrates a kind of historical retaliation in which Algerian troops capture and torture a French Legionnaire.



Renoir, *Parisian Women in Algerian Dress* (1872).

³⁰ Rita Maran’s study, which has a central human rights agenda, evinces the systematic perpetration of torture by the French during that conflict (1). In this poem, however, the torture scene is perpetrated by Algerian soldiers rebelling against the extended torture represented by French colonialism and cultural appropriation.

A deodand is a piece of property (sometimes human) that is sacrificed to a god in connection with the prior death of the owner (*OED*). Religious culpability as well as legal restitution is thus implied in relation to the sacrifice of the Legionnaire, following the transgressions of France having invaded Algeria and over-decorated itself in the trappings of imperialism. Two extra-textual notes are required here. Firstly, Isaiah 3:16-26 includes a condemnation of ornamented women: God will remove their finery and mirrors and repay “beauty” with “burning” or “branding,” depending on the translation. Secondly, “The once queen” that appears in this poem refers to Marie Antoinette (her full name was included in a draft), whose mainstream condemnation revolved around her perceived frivolity and promiscuity, and who was eventually executed by guillotine: the “fierce butcher-reckoning that followed / Her innocent, unthinking masquerade” (*EP* 189). Both of these references closely anticipate the dramatic structure of “The Deodand.” Frivolity, beauty, and the sexualised slander associated with it (“violations” and “swooning lubricities” (*EP* 188-9)), are brought to climax in a scene of punishment. In the poem this involves the amputation of the Legionnaire’s hands (the guillotine resonates here) and his subsequent humiliation, which takes place outside of the frame of the painting. A causal relationship between (the political context of) ornamental beauty and violent retribution underpins this poem.

The adaptation of these antecedent narratives about punished women is emphatically gendered in “The Deodand.” The opening line, “What are these women up to?” is condescending in tone; women are associated with “pillows” while phallic “pillars” represent their “fathers, husbands, fiancées” (*EP* 188). The scene is also said to simmer with “women in heat” (*LP* 188). Writing about Langer’s “notorious” claim that “there are no happy marriages in art – only successful rape” (86), Mitchell

explains that it “illustrates perfectly the sense of violence and violation she associates with the conjunction of artistic media, and hints (rather vividly) at its ideological basis in categories of gender” (*Iconology* 55). Within this perspective it would be possible to align the political and gendered violence at work here with the ekphrastic mode itself. To recall the reference to “The Deodand” in the previous chapter, the actual painting by Renoir exhibits an innocence that is alien to the harsh tone of the poem, which attempts to weigh the former down with its supposed imperialist baggage (Leithauser 6). In the translation from the painting to Hecht’s poem, sumptuously rendered decorative objects become military plunder. The women are “Swathed in exotic finery,” and display their:

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. (*EP* 188)

The “barbarian” epithet is a reminder of the barbarism that was necessary for the embezzlement of this hoard, and which is intimated here in the resemblance of jewellery to the “fetters” and “chains” that work to keep Algeria captive.

The second stanza leaves the timeframe of this painting of imperial riches, and shifts to the point at which Algeria’s “fetters” are violently shaken off. However, the punishment for the process in which the women are implicated is actually levelled against a man, and it repeats the sinister connotations of their adornment. Hints of theatricality, the “*tableau vivant*,” “masquerade,” “mimes of submission,” and “play” narrated in *Paris* (*EP* 188-9), come to fruition in an alternate application of the apparatus of visual illusion:

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,
 And cut off the fingers of both hands. (*EP* 189)

The feminised soldier is subsequently made to beg for food in the only instance of line ending rhyme in the poem, a ditty that mocks France and the Legionnaire to the music of a “popular show tune,” which also contrasts with the high-brow cultural artefacts so far presented (*EP* 190). The double instance of decoration invites reflection upon exactly how nations dress up their past, and the poem implicitly portrays colonialism as a kind of rape. Žižek’s elaboration of violence contains a more recent correlate for the combined effect of the women’s “*tableau vivant*” and the analogous torture of the Legionnaire:

When I saw the well-known photo of a naked prisoner with a black hood covering his head, electric cables attached to his limbs, standing on a chair in a ridiculous theatrical pose, my first reaction was that this was a shot from the latest performance-art show in Lower Manhattan. The very positions and costumes of the prisoners suggest a theatrical staging, a kind of *tableau vivant*, which cannot but bring to mind the whole spectrum of American performance art and ‘theatre of cruelty.’” (172)

Žižek suggests that the violent art image possesses the potential to be recreated in real life, and that the spectacle of torture is indivisible from the culture of violence that surrounds it. In Hecht’s poem this amounts to the culpability of art and fashion in the political crimes they indirectly celebrate.

Postcolonial politics are entrenched within visual art in “The Deodand.”

Unlike the paintings of the namedropped Ingres and Delacroix (who recorded Arab

culture *in situ*), the Renoir piece actually depicts “Parisian Women in Algerian Costume.” Renoir documents a popular trend in French fashion, inspired by the earlier artists’ orientalisering work, rather than actively exploiting the attraction of exotic alterity. Mitchell would again expand this political tendency to artistic mediums and the ekphrastic act, in that:

The presentation of imagistic elements in texts, textual elements in images is, in other words, a familiar practice which might be ‘defamiliarised’ by understanding it as a transgression, an act of (sometimes ritual) violence involving an incorporation of the symbolic Other into the generic Self.

(*Iconology* 157)

By this logic Hecht’s incorporation of an imagistic element in his poem repeats the transgression of cultural appropriation on an additional level to the violent confiscation of exotic beauty by a colonial power. This illegitimate process is also signalled by Hecht’s rampant quotation of French terms, some of which appear italicised and others not so. This arbitrary acknowledgement of cultural appropriation emphasises the antagonism that goes on both within the realm of language, and in a violent corporeal fashion outside of it. The italicised terms are “*femme-de-chambre*,” “*arrondissement*,” “*haute-bourgoise*,” “*tableau vivant*,” “*poisons d’or*,” and the closing song entirely in French (*EP* 188-90). Those words that go unacknowledged are “charade,” “fiancées,” “vassalage,” “masquerade,” “debauch,” “voyeur,” “carmined,” and perhaps “grotesquely” (*EP* 188-90). What Žižek identifies as the “‘symbolic’ violence embodied in language and its forms” (1), is detectable here upon a second perusal of the poem, after the huge gulf between stanzas has been appreciated.

The decorative section of the poem, set in Paris, indeed prepares for the brute instrumentation of empire:

What is all this but crude imperial pride,

Feminized, scented and attenuated,

The exploitation of the primitive. (*EP* 189)

The message of this juxtaposition relies upon a later variant of a quotation from Santayana, that “Those who will not be taught by history / Have as their curse the office to repeat it” (*EP* 189).³¹ In the context of this poem, the women are deemed culpable, having “no intimation, no recall” of their precursor Marie Antoinette, and thus repeating her dangerous folly (*EP* 189). Santana states, “Retentiveness, we must repeat, is the condition of progress” (286). His pun in that sentence (he “must repeat” his point about repetition), finds its correlate in the structure of Hecht’s poem. The multiple layers involved in a poem (by Hecht) about a painting (by Renior) that depicts the recreation of another painting (“by Ingres or Delacroix”), anticipates the more serious repetition of the women’s masquerade in the torture of the Legionnaire.

Hecht’s conventionally ekphrastic poems offer no genuine refuge from the ravages of time or from responsibility for the crimes of history. In fact they scrutinise that possibility as it may relate to artist, painted subject, and reader alike. Far from approximating ornamental shields within an otherwise savage and brutal oeuvre, Hecht’s ekphrastic poems are among his most historically engaged and potentially violent poems. Indeed, in the last example the very notion of gratuitous ornamentation, and the concurrent ignorance of global historical struggle, is explicitly condemned. This is a violent rejection of the kind of decadent and irresponsible effects that ekphrasis has been interpreted to supply. Art objects that theoretically

³¹ The original version of Santayana’s statement follows: “when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (284).

pause the passage of history are injected by Hecht with an awareness, bordering on transfixion, of the atrocities from which no one is insulated, and for which no one is absolved of responsibility.

Responsible Representation

The question of responsibility is linked to that of representation. Mitchell writes that:

‘Responsible representation’ is a definition for truth, both as an epistemological question (the accuracy and faithfulness of a description or a picture to what it represents) and as an ethical contract (the notion that the representor is ‘responsible for’ the truth of a representation and responsible *to* the audience or recipient of the representation). (*Picture Theory* 421)

This issue is implicit in Hecht’s re-contextualisation of Renoir’s painting and his assessment of Matisse’s seclusion from history. Both of these poems, by virtue of their composition in the ekphrastic mode, also illustrate another of Mitchell’s comments upon the social importance of representation:

The tensions between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture. . . . issues like ‘gender, race, and class,’ the production of ‘political horrors,’ and the production of ‘truth, beauty, and excellence’ all converge on questions of representation. (*Picture Theory* 3)

The “political horror” of the Algerian war for independence is brought out precisely in the tension between the visual image and its textual rendering in “The Deodand,” for instance. Ekphrasis affords a form of self-referentiality whereby the discussion of visual artistic practices reflects upon the artistic practice of the poet. If these poems

are concerned with the ethics of representation in such artworks, then they also invite an evaluation of their own engagement of history at its most destructive.

However, this issue is not confined to literature about artworks. The general question of responsible representation typically crystallises around the holocaust, and this is perhaps the subject that recurs with the greatest force and frequency in Hecht's verse. Before his self-conscious representation of the Shoah is explored, the intense debate about the (im)possibility of writing after, or of representing, that event will contextualise his artistic responsibility to history. The discourse around the writing of poetry after Auschwitz frequently returns to the following statement of Theodor Adorno:

The more total the society the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its attempt to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. ("Cultural Criticism" 34)

Adorno contends that writing, especially in the German language, is a compromised activity as a result of this "absolute reification." German culture, the same that produced Nazism, has had its authority and credibility damaged. Poetry produced in the wake of this process would, by its very existence, attest to the normal functioning of that culture after the fact. It would also presumably contribute to the illusion of the

hiding or healing its dramatic past. This is because, as Adorno later elaborated, “Whoever calls for the resurrection of this guilty and shabby culture becomes its accomplice” (*Dialectics* 369).

It has often been interpreted that Adorno denounces all literary and artistic activity after the holocaust. His statement ignited an extensive discussion of the impossibility of representation, and a wealth of retorts, including one from Edmond Jabès that Hecht supplies in *Melodies Unheard*, that “yes, one can. And furthermore, one must” (135). However, Adorno does not forbid the writing of poetry after Auschwitz. The accomplices of the “shabby culture” that he identifies in *Negative Dialectics* include even those that desist from continued cultural production: “Not even silence gets us out of this circle, since in silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalise our subjective inability, thereby once again degrading truth into a lie” (369). Adorno does not advocate the cessation of poetry, then. Rather, he claims that the impossibility of art is embroiled in its inevitable, or necessary, continuation. This dialectic is his proposal for the relative positioning of “culture and barbarism” after Auschwitz.

Another important figure in this discussion is the poet Paul Celan. In his “Meridian” speech, Celan describes how a character from Büchner, “dies a theatrical, I am tempted to say iambic death which we only two scenes later come to feel as his own, through another person’s words” (39). If other people’s words can return autonomy to the dead, then literary representation of the holocaust (focusing on different kinds of “prisoners” than those featuring in Büchner’s work (“Meridian” 39)) is entirely necessary. Language is, for Celan, the single human outlet that is resistant to barbarity:

"Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. ("Bremen Speech" 34)

His own "Fugue of Death" presents a flowing sequence of circumlocutions around the death camp. Language in this poem experiences a near breakdown, and stages this "lack of answers" and "murderous speech:" "A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes" ("Fugue of Death" 33). The lines of the poem are equally serpentine in their coiling around, and recoiling from, the horrors of the camp. But poetry has somehow endured these innumerable "losses."

Hecht is subject to a similar struggle in the responsible articulation of his encounter with the holocaust. On his experience during the Second World War, and the moral conundrum of survival, the poet writes:

I was in combat, and I saw a lot of the awfulness of war, but I didn't suffer in any physical way. . . . I saw one of the concentration camps, but neither I, nor, so far as I know, any member of my family was killed in one, or survived one. And there's a certain amount of guilt attached to that, too. It was a horrible experience, of course. But one feels that people like Elie Wiesel have a kind of singular title to write with authority on subjects about which I can't write with the same confidence and the same moral right. (Interview with Anderson and Stephens)

This troubled position is echoed in Hecht's early holocaust poem, "Rites and Ceremonies," the final part of which begins, "Merely to have survived is not an index of excellence, / Nor, given the way things go, Even of low cunning" (*EP* 45). This

anti-Darwinian pronouncement targets both the longevity of the aggressive human species, and challenges the victors and survivors of that particular war and genocide.

Despite the self-professed lack of “authority” and “moral right,” Hecht declares his poetic responsibility to the Jewish victims of the holocaust as something that emerged over the course of his life and work, stating that, “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.” (Hoy 28). Hecht proposes to justify his survival through the act of written representation. In “House Sparrows,” what begins as an indirect representation of the Jewish people is given its historical weight by an image contained in another medium. The poem presents its titular creatures as “Meek *émigrés* come over on the ark,” that exhibit “The wide-eyed, anxious haste of the exiled” (*EP* 215). The line suggesting that “their safety lies in numbers / And hardihood and anonymity,” is rendered poignantly ironic, however, following the subsequent question and answer, “Where have we seen such frailty before? / In pictures of Biafra and Auschwitz” (*EP* 215). Tattooed “numbers,” the “anonymity” they bestow, and the sheer human “numbers” eliminated in the Nazi genocide are highly visible owing to their being “seen” and “picture[d]” in this meta-representation.

Hecht’s position with regards “The timely importance” of poetic representation is illustrated in his writing upon Auden’s poem, “September 1, 1939” (*Hidden Law* 152).³² That “*engagé* poem” faces the horror of the historical moment

³² “September 1, 1939” by W. H. Auden contains the famous lines:

There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies. (97)

announced in its title (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 130), and is commended by Hecht appropriately:

Like many poetry readers of my generation, I continue to be enormously grateful for this poem. No one else took it upon him – or herself to address directly and unequivocally the massive crisis that was inevitably to become the Second World War Auden addressed the crisis at its inception, regarded it with historical perspective that in no way diluted the force and horror of its importance; made the crisis psychological, personal, and universal. (*Hidden Law* 152)

Auden's quasi-prophetic position is unavailable to Hecht, but the latter assigns equal importance to the poetry attending directly to that same massive crisis after the fact. The drive to regard such events "with historical perspective that in no way dilute[s] the force and horror of its importance" is at the forefront of Hecht's art.

A holocaust poem that is especially diverse in its images, historical trajectory, and modes of address, is Hecht's four part "Rites and Ceremonies," from *The Hard Hours*. The poem is saturated with Biblical references, but remains distinctly Hebraic, being addressed to "Father, Adonoi, author of all things . . . in whom we doubt" (*EP* 38). "The Room," its opening segment, is involved with the sponsorship of the Church assumed by the Nazis. This process has linguistic and visual manifestations. It occurs in the inscription of the term Emmanuel on soldiers' belt buckles, "which being interpreted means / 'Gott mit uns,'" and in the "Iron Cross" that is an appropriation of the crucifix, here glimpsed on a dead soldier, "Helmet spilled off, head / Blond and boyish and bloody" (*EP* 38).

Within this antagonistic religious frame is the recurring motif of the window, characterised by its problematic position between interior and exterior (that Hecht

also explored in “Matisse”). Its usual transparency is here installed in an exceptional situation:

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. (*EP* 39)

There is serious irony in the spatial comparison to a “livingroom,” where “The Room” of this poem is emphatically associated with death (the gas chamber). This tourist view of a concentration camp is subsequently contrasted with a different kind of visit. The speaker’s prayers induce a returning trauma, which includes the sensation that:

I am there, I am there. I am pushed through

With the others to the strange room

Without windows; whitewashed walls, cement floor. (*EP* 39)

Hecht’s speaker is troubled by the visibility of death camp victims and the visibility of the traces of their elimination, through variously available historical and personal “windows.” This poem perhaps itself represents a representational window to the structures of genocide and their psychological impact.

The second part of “Rites and Ceremonies” is entitled “The Fire Sermon.” That phrase is, in its original usage, a sermon by the Buddha on the subject of the alleviation of suffering through a studied detachment from the senses (note in *Selected Poems* 243). It here additionally relates to the death by fire that is the central crisis of this section, and also significantly alludes to the title of the third part of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In his reading Hecht detects “the collapse of western Europe [as] a symbol of the desecration, sterility, and grief, both collective and individual, that lies of the core of *The Waste Land*” (“Prefaces” 209). His own poem is therefore

concerned with how to follow Eliot in light of a further decline in civilisation. This is accomplished, in part, by Hecht's recycling of locutions and motifs from that antecedent work. Intertextual references to *The Waste Land* are endemic in "Rites and Ceremonies." "What the Thunder Said" prefigures "The Room," for instance, in its description of an un-located chapel, which "has no windows," and in its reference to "our empty rooms" (*Selected Poems* 66-7).

Continuing the scrutiny of the protective and curative properties of faith begun in "The Room," "The Fire Sermon" turns to prayer in a direct amendment of Eliot's example. In the precursor's corresponding "Fire Sermon," the prayer is unfinished: "O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest // burning" (*Selected Poems* 62). In Hecht, however, the prayer is complete, "Is there not one / Whom thou shalt pluck for love out of the coals?" but it goes unanswered with the refrain, "Out of hearing" (*EP* 42). Eliot's line, before its disintegration, quotes a variant of Augustine's *Confessions* (book 10, part 53), which Hecht also rephrases as a question. This desperate instance of unreciprocated religious communion occurs in the manner of another of the poem's significant intertexts. The original lines appropriated and adapted from George Herbert's "Deniall," are, "Come, come, my God, O come, / But no hearing" (79). As well as an admission of a personal disconnect with the divine, at a point in time when it is urgently needed, the poem simultaneously affirms the formal and poetic power of incantations ("Rites and Ceremonies"), and announces their practical futility in such extreme contexts.

Divine neglect is not, however, confined to recent appalling histories. Hecht's "Fire Sermon" conflates temporally distant instances of atrocities committed in the name of religion, in line with the saints' admission of culpability in "Meditation." The poem even incorporates a glimpse of the war in Viet Nam as "the child screams

in the jellied fire” (*EP* 45). But within the catalogue of violent Jewish persecution, beginning with the Biblical slaughter of the people of Tharsis by “The Christians” and inevitably leading up to the Shoah, the speaker pauses to reflect on the Minster in Strasbourg, which was the site of two Jewish massacres in 1348 and 1349 (*Oostdijk* 38). This quasi-ekphrastic pause in a series of accounts of brutality is once more suggestive of the refuge to be found in art, and the sanctuary available in religious buildings (A prayer for “sheltering” is yet to come in this section (*EP* 43)). However, the observation is loaded with hints of violence. The edifice:

. . . presents a singularly happy union

Of the style of Northern France

With the perpendicular tendency

Peculiar to German cathedrals.

No signs of the platform are left. (*EP* 41-2)

In this brief segment, the amalgamation of architectural schools highlights the military antagonism of France and Germany that renders this particular “happy union” as “singular.” Absent traces of “the platform” refer to the execution of Jews by burning at this very site, following a spate of accusations made across Europe concerning murdered Christian children and poisoned wells. Diederik Oostdijk raises the possibility “that Hecht sought to highlight how Christian culture, how human beings, are capable of acts of extreme cruelty as well as beauty” (38). This issue is, indeed, central to many of Hecht’s poems on the subject of visual art works.³³

Further, Alicia Ostriker incorporates causality into this assessment, claiming that “Hecht’s art registers a Hellenic delight in beauty and order undermined by the

³³ It is relevant here to review Hecht’s statement, quoted in the previous chapter, that “The past is a bewildering amalgam of ingredients, some of which include the greatest attainments of what we prize as our ‘culture’: the carving of angels on cathedrals, the composing of tragedies . . . But we must be aware that we ourselves are the heirs of all the errors and accomplishments of that past, a past which, if advanced by wisdom, was hindered by folly” (*Hidden Law* 123).

Hebraic conviction that the beauty and order of high culture have been *founded on suffering and cruelty*” (99, my emphasis). This notion offers a model for the cohabitation of art and violence that makes no delusive attempt to distinguish them as separate strands of human activity. In light of Hecht’s comment about Eliot’s core of European “desecration,” the fact that the elder poet also includes an architectural inset, as Oostdijk further points out (39), is telling. Yet where “the walls / Of Magnus Martyr hold / Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold” (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 61), and offer genuine ornamental respite from what Hecht sees as the “sterility and grief” of *The Waste Land*, the later poet refuses to detach the pleasures of art from the (evasion of) historical violence with which they are associated. Magnus Martyr and Strasbourg Cathedral are, importantly, both rebuilt after being ruined in fires (Oostdijk 39). Renewal following immolation is exactly what the speaker seeks for the burned (and exterminated) Jews in “Rites and Ceremonies,” but no divine intervention or redemption occurs.

The incursion of a moment of ekphrastic description in a poem otherwise occupied primarily with suffering and death represents the inverse of Hecht’s more common structural tactic, which is the gradual accrual of ethical and historical relevance during the verbalisation of a visual art work. It attests to the mutual interpenetration of art images and violent images that is fully appropriate to a period in history containing events of such inhumanity that the very potential of culture, and its representational faculties, were called into question. Hecht actively refuses to offer “refuge in painting” or descriptive shields against the ravages of history. In actually deploying art as an occasion for violence and cruelty, he reverses assumptions about the safety of stasis in ekphrasis. This is developed in the total convergence of art

images and violence taken up in the following chapter, which considers the threat of death communicated by imagetexts.

Chapter Three

Death the Imagetext

Reading Imagetexts

Further to his “painterly partiality” and self-conscious deployment of the ekphrastic mode (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 21), Hecht engages directly with images in two sequences of poems that are presented alongside corresponding pictures. This chapter will investigate the theoretical and macabre properties of these composite products of poem and illustration (though illustration is a problematic term, owing to its insinuation of the primacy of the text over its visual accompaniment). The nature of the collaboration between Hecht and American woodcut artist Leonard Baskin permits an analysis of their joint work that treats the combination of poem and picture as a total, indivisible cultural object, in which neither element is privileged over the other. This approach will rely on W. J. T. Mitchell’s work towards the concept of the “imagetext” (supplemented by Roland Barthes’ theory of the “Rhetoric of the Image”), which has its founding instance or epitome in William Blake’s engraved picture poems, supposedly “the most integrated forms of visual-verbal art since the medieval illuminated manuscript” (Mitchell, *Blake* 34). This chapter examines the two series of imagetexts that Hecht produced in partnership with Baskin. These are “The Seven Deadly Sins” from *The Hard Hours* (1958), and “The Presumptions of Death” from *Flight Among the Tombs* (1995).

Baskin’s woodcut prints are presented, depending on the edition, directly above or adjacent to the poems that share their titles. They are not, however, ancillary to the poetic texts, or produced in explicit response to them. Indeed the collaboration was suggested by Baskin. In Hecht’s words:

He was not wholly obsessed by death, and, being a printer as well as illustrator of fine books, he was then interested in emblem books, and wondered whether we might not do one together. (Hoy 108)

The few statements that either artist has made about their combined working methods indicate that ideas were exchanged back and forth, and that certain subjects or characters were agreed upon and then rendered in text and woodcut separately, being fused (sometimes revised) only upon their compilation within the opulent editions in Baskin's own Gehenna Press, before their reproduction in Hecht's *The Hard Hours* and *Flight Among the Tombs*. Baskin also collaborated with the poet Ted Hughes on *Crow* (1970), and that pair "arrived at an 'affinity,' as Baskin calls it, that develops into 'a relationship of presence' rather than 'a relationship of influence'" (Duggan). The illustrations for that project "resist the too-common temptation to act as what Baskin derides as 'visual nomenclature' for poems" (Duggan). It can only be assumed that Baskin sustains this attitude of reciprocity and equality in his work with Hecht. Indeed, Hecht states that "He would propose some subjects, and I could propose any I wished" (Interview with Anderson and Stephens). Yet the poet bore in mind the fact that some publications issued under his name alone would not include Baskin's woodcuts. "The poems, therefore, had to be so composed as to be manifestly independent of the images they were designed to accompany" (Hoy 109). The same independence within co-dependence should be maintained for the images, although they rarely appear in print without Hecht's poems.

In his recollection of the genesis of the collaboration, quoted above, Hecht refers to the Renaissance tradition of the emblem book (Hoy 108). Hollander explains this particular format as follows:

An image is accompanied by a glossary text . . . whose function is frequently to tie a motto or tag line or proverbial bit to the object . . . However depicted, the interpretive text deals with the image as if it were a diagram, treating all details of the representation as if they were invisible. (37)

The notion of the “glossary” or “interpretive text” within the emblem book tradition suggests precisely the opposite bias to that conveyed by the term “illustration.” The auxiliary function of the text, with its merely schematic relationship to the image, is not especially evident in the pieces themselves however, nor does it comply with Hecht’s assertion of relative independence of the poems. If the convention of the emblem book is to be rejected in this case, then another model for understanding the relation between visual and verbal elements in composite works must supplant it.

Kress and van Leeuwen, in *Reading Images*, propose the “multimodal text” that makes use of more than one semiotic code, but this category is not elaborated in great detail (183). W. J. T. Mitchell offers a more comprehensive account of what distinguishes the composite verbal-visual work from its constituent parts, in terms of semiotics and representation. His categories are outlined as follows:

I will employ the typographic convention of the slash to designate ‘image/text’ as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term ‘imagetext’ designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. ‘Image-text,’ with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal.” (*Picture Theory* 89)

The term “imagetext,” nullifying the antagonistic punctuation of the slash and the overly harmonious reciprocity of the hyphen, is, in theory, able to subsume both possible ruptures in representation and levels of verbal-visual relationality into the general form of suturing it describes. Though it will serve as a useful category to

distinguish the combinatory object from ekphrastic re-presentation of images, Mitchell's division is not without its problems. It is productive, therefore, to introduce another quotation from the same theorist, as a part of his work on William Blake, that tests his categories in practice.

Mitchell asserts that Blake is alien to the ekphrastic descriptive tradition (something which effects cleavages in representation as it simultaneously brings relations of verbal and visual to the surface), since "the main thrust of his poetry is dramatic" (*Blake* 20). Rarely descriptive, his work elaborates dramatised states of mind and "thunderous dialogues" (Mitchell, *Blake* 20). Though Hecht has demonstrated that ekphrasis is perfectly compatible with what could be termed his "thunderous monologues," notably "See Naples and Die" and "The Venetian Vespers," his composite picture poems eschew that technique of dramatised looking in favour of the kind of "thunderous dialogues" precisely between text and image, which also characterise Blake's work. Mitchell continues to define the multimedia work with reference to that artist:

Blake constructed image-text combinations that range from the absolutely disjunctive ('illustrations' that have no textual reference) to the absolutely synthetic identification of verbal and visual codes (marks that collapse the distinction between writing and drawing). (*Picture Theory* 91)

In order to discuss the coexistence of these divergent approaches to amalgamation ("disjunctive" and "synthetic," where the latter refers to synthetic identifications within works rather than synthetic works as such), Mitchell reinserts the hyphen into his coinage. This occurs with reference to works that actually conform fully to his definition of the "dialectical . . . figure" of the "imagetext" (*Picture Theory* 9), emphatically not hyphenated. This is likely because the feature Mitchell wants to

identify is the relationality that is distinct from absolute synthesis, although both are implied in that unpunctuated term. By allowing his categories to overlap, Mitchell insinuates that the extent to which images relate to texts is dictated by the artist (something “Blake constructed”), as opposed to something appreciated in the reading of the work, and therefore open to interpretation. Mitchell’s very suggestion of the lack of “textual reference” in the images of certain composite pieces depends entirely on the affinities between verbal and visual signs, in terms of content, tone, style, and so on, that are identified in the reading, rather than being immanent in the object.

Mitchell’s two punctuated categories do not represent two more kinds of artistic object, but rather two other ways of reading them, whether or not these objects would meet the definition criteria of the imagetext itself. The notion of a rupture in representation (signified by Mitchell’s slash) is plausibly collapsible into the synthetic object, but such a schism, and the “absolutely synthetic identification” that he believes to be equally possible, are, in theory, mutually exclusive. They may only coexist to the extent that different reader-viewers can find convincing evidence for each. It would be more effective to claim that works range across this spectrum of verbal-visual relation and antagonism. This is not to say that every image, text, or imagetext is located at a fixed point on such a scale, but rather that each can be read as variously synthetic or disjunctive. This is a process of communication through signs rather than an objective science. It will be necessary, then, to return to Barthes’ antecedent remarks in “Rhetoric of the Image,” for clarification about the way in which such processes depend upon reader reception rather than authorial intention.

In “Rhetoric of the Image,” one of Roland Barthes’ crucial premises states that “all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others” (274). This is

the state of images in isolation. But Barthes' subject is the way in which the addition of linguistic elements fundamentally changes the reception of the image. One necessary limitation of his analysis resides in his decision to survey only images of mass culture and advertising, excluding those of art and literature. In a sense this choice dictates his general subordination of text to the supposedly more significant communication enacted by pictures. He does not explicitly consider the image as an addition to the text, as something that limits, unlocks or guides the reading of the words, but rather discusses the inverse relation, whereby text impacts the reception of the image. With the acknowledgement of Barthes' particular agenda, his work offers an amendment to Mitchell's puzzling of the enmity and unity of verbal and visual signs.

His "Rhetoric of the Image" states, then, that the linguistic message is a means to "*fix* the floating chain of signifieds [that make up the image] in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (274). Barthes goes on to explain how the different functions and processes involved in the appendage of text to image, at least in the commercial examples he dissects, modify the message that would be conveyed by images in isolation. Of the situation whereby language is used to name or identify elements in an image, Barthes writes that "The denominative function corresponds exactly to an *anchorage* of all the possible (denoted) meanings by recourse to a nomenclature" (274). Language may also attempt to elicit a further identification or meaning that is not necessarily dormant in the image itself. In this circumstance of the "symbolic message," as Barthes explains, "the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation, constituting a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating . . . this elucidation is selective . . . the text thus has a repressive value" (275).

The variously informative and repressive role of words accompanying images, then, is a process aiming to guide response, but one that occurs only in the reception of imagetexts. This emphasis is more effective than Mitchell's focus on the role of the artist. In fact, it is even plausible to suggest that the very identification of the "denominative" or "symbolic" function of language in these multimodal situations depends on the way that the imagetext is received and interpreted. The most significant statement to take away from Barthes' piece is his explanation that:

The language of the image is not merely the totality of utterances emitted (for example at the level of the combiner of the signs or creator of the message), it is also the totality of utterances received: the language must include the 'surprises' of meaning." (280-1)

It will be useful, if permissible, to extrapolate this assertion also to the language of language, so to speak, whereby connotations and associations accumulate equally in the reception of verbal texts as visual artworks. In addition, these "surprises of meaning," could be said to figure in the reciprocal compositional process instituted by Hecht and Baskin. In analyzing these imagetexts, dialogue and similitude between picture and poem will be found to reside at least partially in eccentric interpretations by one artist upon previewing the work of the other, that are subsequently transfused into the other medium. However, it will not be possible to confirm which was the originating representational choice.

Before "The Seven Deadly Sins" and "The Presumptions of Death" are dealt with in full, it remains to justify the shift in this inquiry from poems of art and violence to these pieces that exhibit an obsession with death. Violence of course may bring about death, and death is the final state of affairs whether violence takes place or not, but these phenomena are by no means collapsible. Within the logic of image

theory, the step from violence to death is easily made, since the heralded shielding function of visual art is above all an escape from “the death that all time-objects suffer” (Steiner 41). The titles of these two projects make clear their topic in common. Though not as explicit as “The Presumptions of Death,” the pivotal subject of which is openly declared, “The Seven Deadly Sins” includes the word “Dead” and refers to the assortment of vices reserved for special condemnation in Christian doctrine. They are punishable by death or indeed liable to cause it in their own right, if taken to their extreme conclusions. There is violence in this threat of death (and its inevitability is the most easily validated of “Presumptions” on the subject).³⁴

A long passage from an interview with Hecht conducted by Langdon Hammer is worth full citation here. It explains the significance of the subject of death to both artists. In the words of the poet:

I can remember seeing the bodies of men who jumped to their deaths on New York sidewalks during the Depression. I was in the front lines of combat during World War II. And at my age not only many of my contemporaries but not a few of my juniors (including my own brother) have predeceased me. And then to teach English and American poetry, as I have done for well over forty years, is to come to grips with a good number of elegies, as well as religious poems about Death, an astonishing abundance of mortuary materials. Finally I think it pertinent that this book is a collaboration with an artist (Baskin) who has himself been seriously preoccupied with the topic. I first

³⁴ Hecht and Baskin’s morbid fixation did not, however, completely govern their collaborative work. “The Presumptions of Death” was followed by *A Gehenna Florilegium* (1998), only published in Baskin’s Gehenna Press limited edition. Hecht wrote sixteen poems that take particular flowers as indirect starting points, while Baskin carved the images. These poems are scattered among Hecht’s final two collections, without their accompanying pictures. Jonathan Post asserts, from his amassing of Hecht’s correspondence, that “a number of poems on Biblical themes in *The Darkness and the Light* were to be part of a shared effort between poet and artist, but Baskin’s death in 2000 prevented this project from reaching fruition” (“Introduction to Chapter 7”).

met him when I went to teach at Smith College in 1956. At that time he was producing a series of small sculptured figures with such titles as "Dead Man" and "Hanged Man." He had at least as much reason as I to acquaint himself with the theme of mortality. His wife was slowly dying of multiple sclerosis. It was anguishing to witness, even on the part of an outsider, like myself. Of Baskin it must have required a stamina that was little short of heroic. All of these factors have combined to set our collaboration on its course. ("Efforts of Attention")

It is significant that, for Hecht, death is something seen and also something read about. Images and words constitute his own production of "mortuary materials" in these collaborative works. The morbid preoccupation is, to Hecht's mind, not confined to his second collaboration. Indeed the initial decision to collaborate that concludes this narrative results in "The Seven Deadly Sins," and it will be a further thirty-seven years before the pair confront death head on.

Punctured Frames

Unlike the later collaboration, "The Seven Deadly Sins" is not divided into its constituent parts in Hecht's contents pages. Though distinct from each other in length, rhythm and other formal considerations, the poems and their pictures are better appreciated and understood as subdivisions of a single totality. Cross-references between them abound, and the elements of design that the "Sins" have in common gain significance by repetition and variation within patterns. In each case a circular woodcut print occupies one page, with the corresponding poem, composed of a single stanza, directly below it. These poems are among the most allusive and confounding in Hecht's oeuvre. Departing from his typical presentation of actual histories,

character psychology, and detailed visual descriptions, they illuminate a concept or trait without the grounding of character and location. The enigmatic nature of these works especially recommends consultation of the relationship between images and text for insight and comprehension. The poems are concerned with crises of spirituality and ideas rather than with nature, concrete objects, or recognisable human situations. This abstraction is amplified by the abundance of biblical references, seven of which are specified in the notes to Hecht's *Selected Poems*.

The embedding of words and images together occurs here for the first time in Hecht's oeuvre. It will be useful to consider his attitude to the formal limits of two dimensional art images in relation to this conjunction of image and text. In *The Laws of the Poetic Art* he states that:

A good painting persuades us that everything relevant is contained within the borders of the painting itself, and whatever remains outside is either more of the same or is trivial by comparison. The framed limits of a painting may be thought roughly to correspond to what in drama Aristotle calls the 'plot.' (16)

Disregarding the discrepancy between paintings and woodcuts, the application of Hecht's statement to the "Sins" would permit three possible claims that do not necessarily exclude one another. First, that Baskin's woodcuts here would be complete by themselves, that the "plot" or significant aspects of these views of sins are exhausted in them (the same could be true of its verbal equivalent in the framing device of the stanzaic break).³⁵ Second, that the poem reproduced directly below the woodcut contains nothing relevant to it, or contains pure duplication (impossible in a different semiotic mode). Third, that a "good painting," in this case, would be permitted to refer to the composite product of the imagetext. The "framed limits" or

³⁵ A further pun on this idea is found in "Death the Film Director," also produced with Baskin, in which the deadly speaker claims to "have designed, with supreme artfulness, / What could be called an inevitable plot" (*LP* 140), with reference to the death that comes at the end of all human stories.

“plot” mentioned here (interestingly hinging upon an analogy between the verbal and visual arts), are not necessarily just the dark roundels of the woodcuts, accompanied by gallery-style glossary text, but might also signify the edges of the page containing both (or even the break either side of these seven consecutive pages).

Equally as important as the possibilities of representation within the limiting frame is the nature of the pictorial frame itself, because this is the liminal space separating the image from the words. In contrast to the inconsistent rectangular shapes of the woodcuts in “The Presumptions of Death” series, the “Sins” prints are all circular. The symbolic significance of this design choice is impossible to pin down in its entirety, since “the more abstract the sign, the greater its semantic extension” (Kress and van Leeuwen 52), but some statements from Hecht and aesthetic theoreticians will give an indication. Kress and van Leeuwen affirm that “The basic geometrical shapes have always been a source of fascination, even of religious awe” (51). A broad sweep of Western art might cite the Russian ikon tradition, Raphael’s circular Madonna and Child paintings, Malevich’s squares, and Mark Rothko’s abstract panels as evidence for this. Yet among these fascinating shapes, Kress and van Leeuwen privilege the self-containment and completion inferred in the circle (52). The particular attributes of the circle are also trumpeted in ekphrastic theory, and feature in one of Hecht’s interpretations of literary violence.

Wendy Steiner writes that the supreme stasis of Myron’s *Discus Thrower* (a object scrutinised in “Dichtung und Wahrheit”) has its verbal equivalent in “Keats’ storied urn and T. S. Eliot’s Chinese jar, oval symbols which contain in themselves a tense fusion of permanence and change, circle and sequence” (41). These precedents of ekphrastic poetry, and the temporal peculiarity attributed to the circular, are referenced in the “ancient Chinese bowls” of Hecht’s “Still Life” (*EP* 211). In the

poet's translation of Aeschylus' ekphrastic *Seven Against Thebes*, which, like the "Sins," revolves around a septet of circular images, the line "The enormous threshing floor, / That is, the circle of his shield" (lines 601-2), is explained in a translator's note. That note argues that "This image alludes both to the roundness of the shield, since the Greek thresh-floor is circular, and to the fecundity of violence – a pervasive theme" (*Seven* 80). The circle, in this classical usage, caters to the proliferation of life and the means by which it is ended (or saved, by a round shield). In this way it repeats the change within permanence suggested in Steiner's interpretation. The figure of the circle is appropriate to the permanent stillness suggested in sins that are deadly, and the "circle and sequence" that are characteristics of the design and layout of these imagetexts also refer to the unending perpetration of such "Sins" across human history.

In the poems, appropriately the first and last of the series, it is also possible to detect rhythmic circularity. The first, "Pride," evokes the stasis of repetition in its single rhyming sound. The poem centres on the variable and antagonistic relationship between humans and the Godhead, in line with the Christian origin of the discourse around these sins. It follows, in full:

‘For me Almighty God Himself has died,’
Said one who formerly rebuked his pride
With, ‘Father, I am not worthy,’ and here denied
The Mercy by which each of us is tried.³⁶ (*EP* 49)

The dialogue contained in the poem is also circular in its beginning with the most recent piece of reported speech, then quoting something the person said previously to it, before returning to the consequences of his or her second declaration (which was

³⁶ The suggestion is that pride is a quality or activity that precludes mercy because that right is removed by the transgression of a deadly sin. But it is a sin precisely because it refutes the value of divine mercy by favouring a (blasphemous) belief in the self.

presented first). “Lust,” the last poem in the sequence, is similarly circular in the rhyming of its first and final lines (“mother” and “other”), but this feature is not consistent across all of the segments of “Sins” (*EP* 55).

In addition to their rhythmic circularity, the poems feature sonic and musical components. “Envy” narrates the hypothetical establishment of “the True Republic” to the sound track of “a popular tune” (*EP* 50), and “Wrath” narrates a moment in which “the heavenly hosts” sing “Dies Irae” (*EP* 51). “The Seven Deadly Sins” has been imparted with a further sonic dimension in its arrangement for tenor and piano by Robert Beaser (Hoy 106). Poetry, in this sense, may offer an occasion for music as well as a discussion about it. The rhythm of “Pride” is syncopated in the conventional musical sense, since the third of four otherwise strictly iambic pentameter lines includes two extra beats, falling on the word “denied” (*EP* 49). The musical concept of syncopation can be extrapolated to account for another design feature of the combination of image and text.³⁷ Northrop Frye adopts the idea of syncopation in his understanding of composite verbal and visual artefacts. He relates the technique specifically to the imagetexts of William Blake:

In the longer poems there is, of course, a good deal of syncopation between design and narrative. At the bottom of Plate 8 of *Jerusalem* is a female figure harnessed to the moon: the symbol is not mentioned in the text until plate 63. The effect of such devices is to bind the whole poem together tightly in a single unit of meaning. (Frye 41)

This method is rampant within “The Seven Deadly Sins.” Correspondences and exchanges take place among picture poems as well as within their duality of verbal and visual elements. A prominent example is the “glutton worm” that “shall tunnel in

³⁷ Syncopation in the visual medium relies on repetition or insertion within aesthetic patterns.

the head” in “Gluttony” (*EP* 54), which is more overtly evident in the image of a worm or snake emerging from a woman’s mouth in “Wrath” (*EP* 51). This example represents an argument for the artistic unity of the “Sins” through the interaction between distant segments, images, and their closest textual counterparts.



Baskin, *Wrath* (1958).

Explicit interaction between image and text does, of course, also occur within individual segments. The image of “Lust,” for instance, comes closest to duplicating its verbal counterpart.



LUST

The Phoenix knows no lust, and Christ, our mother,
Suckles his children with his vintage blood.
Not to be such a One is to be other.

Hecht and Baskin, *Lust* (1958).

The woodcut portrays an androgynous figure whose face, beard and halo recall conventional depictions of “Christ,” while “our mother” is suggested in the distended breasts of the figure, which are complete with veins and scars that relate to the “vintage blood” of the poem (*EP* 55). “The Phoenix” is suggested in the wings of the figure, also resembling “the heavenly host / Gentle as down, and without private parts” described in “Wrath” (*EP* 51). This basic interpretation would approach what Mitchell labelled total “synthesis” between verbal and visual components (*Picture Theory* 91). However, the relationship is predominately “denominative,” in that nouns in the poem principally identify signs in the images (Barthes 274), though the enigmatic final line is not easily detected in the image.

This relative harmony between poem and picture is not consistently the case across all of the “Sins,” however. An exceptional instance to the containment and completion of “plot” offered in the visual frame as described by Hecht is to be found in “Gluttony.” The text and picture are certainly connected but that connection implicitly manifests itself as kind of intermedial rivalry. It is appropriate that in a piece pertaining to greed and excess, the image of a boar ridden by an obese female human is hungrily stepping out of and puncturing the circular field in which the woodcut is separated from the words of the poem (*EP* 54).



GLUTTONY

Let the poor look to themselves, for it is said
 Their savior wouldn't turn stones into bread.
 And let the sow continually say grace.
 For moss shall build in the lung and leave no trace,
 The glutton worm shall tunnel in the head
 And eat the Word out of the parchment face.

Hecht and Baskin, *Gluttony* (1958).

Three sharp trotters protrude as if to give the entire circular image legs of its own, or as though an invasion of the space devoted to text is executed or threatened. This potential antagonism against the verbal is encapsulated in the last line of this poem, “And eat the Word out of the parchment face” (*EP* 54). Eating the word (presumably Biblical in its capitalisation) out of the parchment face, might refer to two activities. These would be the consumption and destruction of the written text, or a kind of writing by subtraction here conveyed through the metaphor of eating. The gluttonous boar may be poised to eat away the words beneath it (which also refer to their own consumption), or poised to make words or meaning by eating away at the space around them

Aside from the self-conscious embattlement of word and image on the “parchment face” of the poetry page, the possibility of creation by subtraction would have its correlate in Michelangelo’s attitude to the sculptural process whereby the sculpted figure is already extant in a marble block, merely requiring to be released from its encasement (Gombrich 313). This attitude to technique affines with the method of woodcut printing in particular, especially given their black and white reproduction in Hecht’s books, which relates to a second artistic correlate. This is a quotation attributed to painter Henry Fuseli that appears in “The Venetian Vespers,” which reads “I throws in / My darks. And then I takes away my lights” (*EP* 229). The white, non-inked sections of a woodcut are indeed the parts that are taken (or “eaten”) away from the wood block, since the image produced is a negative. On the subject of artistically produced images in particular, Barthes writes that:

The operation of the drawing (the coding) immediately necessitates a certain division between the significant and the insignificant: the drawing does not

reproduce *everything* (often it reproduces very little), without its ceasing,

however, to be a strong message . . . there is no drawing without style. (277)

In these terms the black or blank spaces that constitute the background in Baskin's woodcuts are not absences of significance but significant presences in themselves (contributing to "a strong message"), especially in their being produced in the preservation rather than the removal of wood in the compositional process. This is most evident in "Pride," in which the central human figure and its animal accomplice are placed in front of an opaque background, from which emerge obscured animal shapes that are reminiscent of Goya's etchings (*EP 49*). In particular, *The Sleep of Reason Breeds Monsters*, the title of which corresponds to Hecht's poem, in which pride replaces logic with disastrous spiritual consequences, resembles this image. Baskin blurs the boundary between presence and absence in this stylistic feature of his woodcuts, but the inclusion and omission of elements of the poem in the picture, and vice versa, also engages this motif.



Baskin, *Pride* (1958).



Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Breeds Monsters* (c. 1797).

In their discussion of the compositional structures of the products of visual design, the majority of which inhabit the realm of advertising, Kress and van Leeuwen claim that, generally speaking, “what has been placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, what has been placed at the bottom as the Real” (193). Baskin’s images are symbolic or mythical. They depict ambiguously aggressive or victimised human representatives or anti-deities, that obliquely evoke the sin of their title. If the information below is “the Real” then it is the mini-dramas and crises of personal or theological logic in the poems that render the black and white (pun intended) pictorial view of each “Sin” inadequate. A conversation between the ideal and the real is appropriate to a set of imagetexts involving (severed) connections to divinity, its regulations and punishments, and perverted images of religious topoi. But it would be too simplistic to categorise the poetry as a reality check on the images, since they reciprocally amend each other’s assumptions or central elements. Kress and van Leeuwen earlier state that in images (and the same can be claimed for texts, especially short poetry), “it is never the ‘whole object’ but only ever its criterial aspects which are represented” (6). This is essentially the position stated by Barthes in his discussion of the inclusions and omissions constituting a “strong message” (277). The poet and woodcut artist have simply concentrated on different “criterial aspects,” rather than deliberately electing the visual as ideal and the verbal as real.

Correspondences within the “Sins” are not, however, confined to individual “syntheses” or “disjunctions” (in Mitchell’s terms, *Picture Theory* 91), or to the belated descriptions and wandering similarities of syncopation. Kress and van Leeuwen state that, in addition to, or precisely being comprised of, their “criterial aspects,” “What multiple images or objects have in common (i.e. the human skull) is called their ‘superordinate’” (251). The human skull is actually the dominant visual

superordinate in “The Presumptions of Death,” but here it is the recurrence of animals in the woodcuts. All of the images include a central human form with an animal component, excepting “Sloth,” which, coincidentally, names an animal in its title. Here it will be useful to refer to the anthropological and theological concept of totemism, one which runs against the dominant Christian background of the poems. This involves “Animal forms, sometimes combined with human forms . . . engraved upon the posts at the sides of the door of entry” (Durkheim 114), of a community in order to protect it (much like the classical “palladium” discussed in the first chapter). The fact that such images are “engraved” amplifies their relevance to Hecht’s work with Baskin, who also engraves animals to be printed alongside poems.

“Envy” supplies a contorted face and bald head with the ram-like horns that are suggestive of the envious figure of the cuckold, while the poem seeks the equality “Of good looks to all men,” that might constitute the remedy for that interpersonal state of affairs (*EP* 50). The poem of “Avarice” includes “camels,” while the image conversely displays a woman wearing a wolfskin cap (*EP* 53). This stylistic choice relates to the totem because, as Freud notes, “At specified solemn occasions, like religious ceremonies, the skins of certain animals are donned” in most totemic traditions (105). “Pride” depicts a kind of bird-woman (*EP* 49), while “the sow” made to “continually say grace” in “Gluttony” exists in ambiguous relation to the possible visual referents of the male pig and the large buxom woman that is riding on top of it (*EP* 54). The syncopation of the “worm” in that poem to the image of “Wrath” also relates to the cross-pollination of totems, a phenomenon made explicit in the rule of exogamy among members of the same animal group that Freud examines in depth (15).

While “Wrath” depicts the emergence of an animal from a human, or the reverse (its invasion), the other poems either append animal features to human bodies, or show humans wearing or riding animals. Such images of co-dependence, sponsorship and sovereignty are not discordant with the culture of totemism. But the relationship is one of protection as well as accompaniment. Freud states that “The totem is first of all the tribal ancestor of the clan, as well as its tutelary spirit and protector: it sends oracles and, though otherwise dangerous, the totem knows and spares its children” (14). Its image or idea “was meant to represent a safe place of refuge where the soul is deposited in order to avoid the dangers which threaten it” (Freud 119). It is significant that the potential resonance of totemism within the pictures represents the security within danger that Hecht associates with all visual art. The protective value of images, whether or not Baskin’s chosen motif consciously invokes it, is once again revoked in the second collaboration, in which images and poems alike are vehicles for death.

Fight Among the Tombs

“The Presumptions of Death” follows the model of “The Seven Deadly Sins” in the ratio of one woodcut to one poem, but with the poems placed adjacently to the images.³⁸ This collaboration also repeats the collaborative process whereby Hecht and Baskin provided a poem or woodcut in response to a character or title suggested by either. If Hecht’s poems are ekphrases they are “notional” ekphrases (Hollander 4), since the poet and the artist worked separately without previewing each other’s work

³⁸ In the English Waywiser Press edition of Hecht’s *Later Collected Poems*, the “Presumptions” images are arranged above the text. This would conform to the model of the emblem book, that was mentioned by Hecht in his description of the collaboration. The layout was approved by Hecht, though it was the proposal of editor Philip Hoy (Hoy in an email to myself). Baskin was no longer living at that time. However, in all other trade editions of Hecht’s poems, the poem and picture appear side by side, on opposite pages. This will be the standard arrangement analysed here.

(Post, “Introduction to Chapter 7”). In the initial limited editions in Baskin’s Gehenna Press the woodcuts are brightly coloured by the artist. In all trade editions of Hecht’s poetry, however, including the individual book of *Flight Among the Tombs*, they are issued in black and white.

Tonal contrast is a strong characteristic of these woodcuts, and lines in the verse about darkness, as “edges of shadow harden” in “Death Sauntering About,” refer in advance to this stylistic feature (*LP* 109). However, “Death the Mexican Revolutionary,” for example, was illuminated to depict the single figure in green with a peach face, pink hat, and a bright orange background, and so its reproduction in greyscale significantly darkens the mood.



Baskin, *Death the Mexican Revolutionary* (1995).

Hecht admitted his attraction to the black and white versions in a letter to Baskin, commending him that “The colored papers as well as the colored prints are gorgeous, but the black and whites are wonderfully powerful in their starkness and their mystery” (Letter to Leonard Baskin, 20 April 1995). Commentary upon the symbolism generated by this particular tonal combination indeed also appears in “Death the Mexican Revolutionary:”

Starvation in our streets
 That gives your canapé
 A more exquisite taste
 By contrast, like the play
 Of shadow and light. (*LP* 130)

The central “contrast” in these imagetexts is that between the states of life and death.

As for the unifying theme of this project, Hecht’s words offer the fullest explanation of the intentions of the pair. The series, he says:

Would be modelled on the medieval Dance of Death . . . Instead of the old medieval tradition in which Death comes and announces himself and says he wants to dance with people from all stations and levels of society, in our sequence, at a certain point, he adopts the identity of other people. (Interview with Anderson and Stephens)

The poems are all dramatic monologues that appear to envoice the skeletal figures in the woodcuts. In the first part, comprised of six imagetexts, “Death” speaks *in propria persona*, engaged in various activities (“Death Sauntering About”) or displaying human attributes (“Death Demure,” “Death the Hypocrite”). In the second part, of sixteen poems, the personification of “Death” is achieved in its adoption of the various professions and personae formerly allotted to its victims (“Death the

Whore,” “Death the Carnival Barker”). This novelty within cumulative morbidity allows Hecht to achieve, within his overarching theme, “the widest variety of tone for the different poems” (Hoy 109). The poems give death a voice to satirise the transient guises of the living, while the accompanying engravings represent death as an enlivened skeletal figure, anthropomorphised, and dressed to kill in ironic human costume.

Hecht claims that “all the personages in our book [are] nothing else than Death thinly disguised” (Letter to Leonard Baskin, Summer 1993). He considered appending an epigraph from John Ruskin to the project that emphasises the theme of disguise that is a principle source of his fascination:

We usually speak as if death pursued us, and we fled from him; but that is only so in rare instances. Ordinarily he masks himself – makes himself beautiful – all-glorious; not like the King’s daughter, all-glorious within, but outwardly: his clothing of wrought gold. We pursue him frantically all our days, he flying or hiding from us. (John Ruskin, *Unto this Last*, Essay III, paragraphs 42-3. Qtd. in Letter to Leonard Baskin, Summer 1993)

Baskin takes up this outward opulence in his playful woodcuts, which more often present death as a comic figure rather than a threatening presence. This contrasts with the precedent for woodcut depictions of death, Albrecht Dürer’s canonical “Knight, Death, and the Devil” (1513).



Dürer, *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513).

The poem, “Death Riding into Town” conflates Dürer’s horseback human and his sinister co-stars as the voice of death, channelled through the vessel of Clint Eastwood, refers to his own representation:

Dürer observed him pass at an easy trot,
 Accompanied by the Devil,
 To some a hero by whom the human lot
 Is finally bulldozed level. (*LP* 117)

In combination, the comic touch and familiarity of the characters represented in the woodcuts and poems counteract the serious quality of traditional representations of death.

Since they are titled “The Presumptions of Death,” these picture poems seek to hypothesise or emulate presumptions made by death, or presumptions made about death. A presumption is an assumption of the truth of a matter until the contrary is proven, and it carries connotations of arrogance and self-assuredness (*OED*). The

dialogue between men and god set up in the “Sins” series (“Pride” especially), is developed in this sequence of poems and pictures that display the arrogance of death in parallel with that of mortals. The arrogance or complacency of the living is the main target for comment and satire by the “Death” character. The reader is spoken to and spoken about (under the category of mortality), but may also see death: both in apprehending its visual personification, and in the sense of seeing it coming.

Hecht sees death coming himself in the potentially self-referential “Death the Poet.” (Those “Deaths” relating to Baskin’s profession will be considered subsequently.) The first three stanzas of this poem interrogate the fates of previous poets and writers, each stanzaic unit of thought closing with an admission of the fact of their non-existence, followed by the Latin refrain, “*Et nunc in pulvere dormio*” (*LP* 126-7). It translates “And now I sleep in the dust,” a variant of a phrase in the Book of Job, 7:21. Despite the fact that among these literary dead “nobody replies,” this refrain may constitute a kind of mechanised response from the ex-poets. For this to be the case, it is necessary that “nobody” is taken literally, that no body may reply since that (dead) body no longer possesses the faculty of movement, thought, or speech. The written word, however, might offer a posthumous substitute.

The refrain comes from the Bible via John Skelton’s “Lament for the Death of the Noble Prince Edward the Fourth,” which borrows it from an anonymous Middle English lyric beginning “I hadde richesse, I hadde my helthe” (note in *Selected Poems* 258). The poem also alludes to “Lament for the Makars” by William Dunbar, and its Latin refrain is “*Timor mortis conturbat me*” (“fear of death troubles me”) (note in *Selected Poems* 258). This richness of resonance is appropriate in a poem about intertextuality and the function and value of dead poets: the Latin refrain subsumes all of these antecedent works, and also speaks of the recycling (or resurrection) of poetic

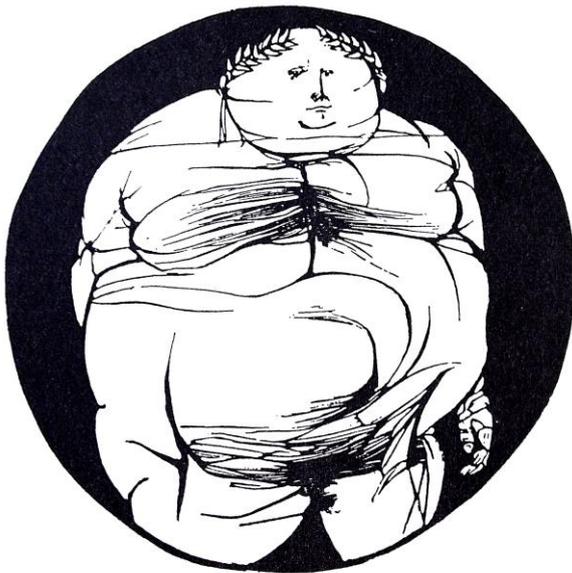
topoi over the course of literary history. The italicisation of the refrain here may signal the speech of such a chorus of dead writers, or may merely indicate the adoption of a language other than English. Though Shakespeare, Tennyson, “the Grub Street hacks he would despise,” as well as the imaginary storyteller called Mother Goose, and the author of “Paradise / Lost and Regained” (John Milton), all write in English, the rich variety of their language is reduced to a single, repeated, and archaising phrase (*LP* 126-7). The poem potentially effects the process of the demise and subsequent equalisation of writers that it describes: “Quelled by the common ratio / That cuts all scribblers down to size” (*LP* 127).



Baskin. *Death the Poet* (1995).

The image is coherent with the subject of the poem, depicting a living man's head decorated with a laurel wreath, facing an identically sized and adorned skull. Both image and text refer to literary reputation after expiration. This is signalled only, and implicitly, by the laurel wreath atop both heads in Baskin's woodcut. That motif also appears in Baskin's woodcut for “Sloth” in “The Seven Deadly Sins.” In that poem the slothful speaker justifies his sin by arguing for the transience of material

rewards for effort: “(Who wins this race / Winds laurel, but laurel dies)” (*EP* 52). The clauses that flank this parenthetical declaration are “The first man leaps the ditch,” and “The next falls in,” relating to success and failure, but also to life and death (*EP* 52). In contrast to the sentiment expressed by this similarly wreathed speaker, the laurel lives on in the image of “Death the Poet,” while its wearer has in fact decomposed (unless he has been re-dressed, or redressed of his poetic reputation, after the fact of his death). The maintenance of honours after death is deemed unlikely and irrelevant by the grim speaker who “cuts all scribblers down to size” (*LP* 127), while the poet itself eulogises them. This imagetext does not argue the issue with regard to the honours bestowed on poetry itself, however: the piece is not entitled “Death the Poetry,” but “Death the Poet.” Hecht has elsewhere stated that “The immortality of art abides the human death” (*Obbligati* 248),³⁹ in morbid agreement with Auden’s argument in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” that although “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying” (89), even when its makers do not.



Baskin. *Sloth* (1958).

³⁹ This also refers to the freezing of life enacted by pictures, discussed in chapter two.

This “Presumption,” then, revolves around the afterlife of the art object and the status of its creator. To discover what exactly is implied about this issue by the imagetext as a whole, it will be useful to turn to Kress and van Leeuwen’s propositions about the arrangement of focal points in visual design. They state, principally in relation to advertising imagetexts that contain two distinct but comparable states or circumstances (as a living and a dead face), that “elements placed on the left are presented as Given, the elements placed on the right as New” (Kress and van Leeuwen 187). Further, “if the left page has text and the right page a picture, the text contains the Given, and the picture the New” (Kress and van Leeuwen 190). The woodcuts are in fact placed on the left, with the poems on the right here. If this scheme is accurate for “Death the Poet,” it raises questions about the relative novelty or improvement involved in the contrary states of life and death.

Death may be “Given:” a fact of existence, an established or exhausted subject for culture, or a phenomenon generally associated with the past (in which most people that lived have also died). In this poem Hecht indeed laments poets that wrote “In damasked language long ago.” Yet any “Presumptions” made about death in the category of “Given” are invalidated if the visual “grammar” advocated by Kress and van Leeuwen is accepted: read from left to right, as for the linguistic convention common to Western culture, the fleshed face in Baskin’s print is “Given,” and its bone counterpart “New.” The disguises of men are relinquished, not in fact adopted (as they happen to be by the personifications of death in this work).

This narrative of the two parts of Baskin’s image would replicate the transition from life to death that all mortal beings undergo, and would follow the logic of the line in the poem that states, “This living hand indites, and dies” (although in this case it is an expiring head rather than a hand (*LP* 126)). Death can equally be

construed as something “New,” never being experienced by people that remain alive, and occurring only in their future. But by the extended rationale of Kress and van Leeuwen, this coterminous presentation of the living and the dead (in narrative, mirror image, or dialogue in which “nobody replies” (*LP* 126)), represents the “Given” part of the opposition in which the text of the poem is the “New.” Baskin’s implicit suggestion of literary honours outliving the poet may be the given situation, while Hecht’s more cynical attitude would offer a new amendment. This interpretive tool recommends or forces serious attention to the inter-animating principles and suggestive relationships between elements of imagetexts, but it may not uncover the true reality of death or unravel the intentions of the artists. It might be more productive to understand the oppositions between given and new, picture and poem, the living and the dead, as a dialogue. These are the kind of “quiet, twin-skulled *tête-à-têtes*” that also define the speaker’s relationship to classic authors in “Death the Scholar” (*LP* 143). The image in this second imagetext on the subject of the study of literature depicts another bone head, propped between large volumes of writing. This image repeats the textual and cultural pin-holing of death that is precisely enacted in this series of picture poems.



Baskin. *Death the Scholar* (1995).

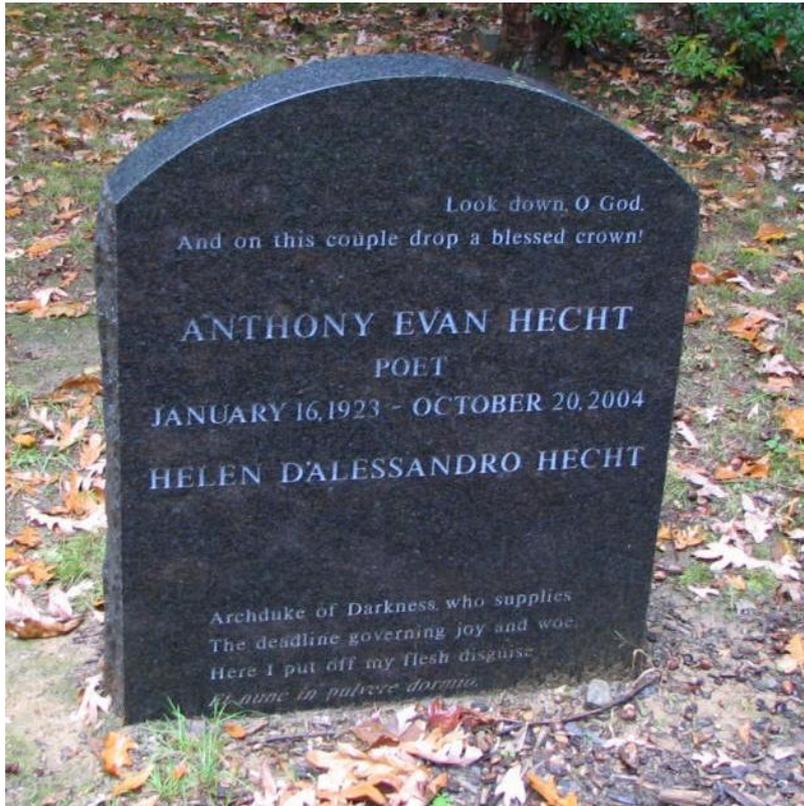
Whatever the interpretive slant, Baskin's image for "Death the Poet" displays the process of unmasking that occurs in death and, like Hecht's poem, relates to the figure of the death mask. As Jean-Luc Nancy understands it, "The death mask makes the 'image' of death visible . . . how it shows itself or appears, its aspect, or the aspect of a death in general" (24). Death cannot be understood, plainly, without the dead. The death mask is a representation that refers to a particular dead person, it silently announces that fact of their demise, and it comes closer than other kinds of representations to picturing the force (or lack thereof) by which death occurs. The restriction of the message of this imagetext to any existing or hypothetical "Poet," is, however, to overlook the details of the poem. The "grand authorial earthshakers" that are "thunderous as the breakers" in print, recall the pagan and classical divinities (*LP* 126), while "author" is permitted its standard meaning as well as that used in Hebrews 12:2 (Jesus as "the author and finisher of our faith"). Both these literary and religious senses are conflated in the subtitle of this "Ballade-Lament for the Makers," where "Makers" implies artistic creation and the idiom of meeting one's maker (*LP* 126). Hecht suggests here that death not only arrives for individual creators, as the poet depicted in Baskin's print, but for creation in general. By acknowledging his own funerary form in the subtitle, Hecht actualises the remainder of the statement made in *Obbligati*, cited above, which continues, "The immortality of art abides the human death. And does it honour by commemoration. That is to say, all songs are requiems, all poems elegies, making something sweet out of life in the very teeth of death" (248). The suggestion in this poem that death is sovereign over poet and divine creator alike conforms to Hecht's assurance that death is both the principal cause for artistic beauty, as well as an overarching concern that infiltrates all culture.

These imagetexts flaunt exactly this presumption about death. Each of the twenty-two works being self-consciously spoken by and concerned with death, they admit on the surface what other artistic illusions attempt to hide, that “all poems [are] elegies,” and are thus unconsciously saturated with death. But Hecht is not only the writer of this poem; he is also counted among its subjects or victims. The poet has a special relationship with the (literal and figurative) afterlife of this poem in particular. Whether or not Hecht encouraged certain of his readers and acquaintances to take up “Archduke of Darkness” as his nickname in poetry circles, it was actually his wish to have the final stanza of this poem inscribed on his tombstone.⁴⁰ This wish was fulfilled, and since “Death” came to “the Poet” in the autumn of 2004 (the cause was lymphoma), it is possible to read these lines on his grave at the Cemetery of Bard College in New York State.⁴¹

Archduke of Darkness, who supplies
 The deadline governing joy and woe,
 Here I put off my flesh disguise
Et nunc in pulvere dormio. (LP 127)

⁴⁰ According to Hecht’s widow, Helen, to whom Jonathan Post kindly posed this question on my behalf. Part of the opening stanza of this poem is also written in gold leaf on the frieze around the ceiling of the library in Hecht’s home, designed by his wife (Languagehat).

⁴¹ This tendency is not uncommon among writers. W. B. Yeats’ example is particularly resonant here, his tombstone reading, “*Cast a cold Eye / On Life, on Death. / Horseman, pass by!*” from his own “Under Ben Bulben” (401). That poem also provided the epigraph to Hecht’s “The Venetian Vespers.”



Self, *The Grave of Anthony Hecht*.

This is the only instance in “Death the Poet” in which the syntax uninterruptedly flows from the penultimate to the last line, to finally and fully incorporate the Latin refrain. “Flesh disguise” relates to the professions, accoutrements, and costumes that mortals adopt in order to hide the fact that their actual disguise is the living skin that conceals their bones and decomposable matter. This series of imagetexts has “Death” mimic the delusions of the living, and here the speaker puts off the disguise of Anthony Hecht and writes as death itself.

Self-referentiality also occurs in Baskin’s woodcuts, in particular those that picture death in the artistic professions. These are what Mitchell calls “metapictures . . . where pictorial representation displays itself for inspection” (*Picture Theory* 48). A metapicture is “a picture about itself, a picture that refers to its own making” (*Picture Theory* 42). Two such metapictures are included in the “Presumptions” series: “Death the Copperplate Engraver,” and “Death the Painter.” Elaborating upon the other

poems that engage processes of engraving, as the “honed scalpel” and “carving hand” of “Death as a Member of the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke” (*LP* 121), Hecht’s verse here emphasises the violent connotations of the artistic act. If death is the speaker of the poems, he may also be the author of the woodcuts, since the same tools and physical gestures are employed in the sculpture of wood plates as and the delivery of deathblows. The tone of “The Presumptions of Death” is consistently malevolent, if often jocular, but these poems involved with art contain the most explicit threats of violence in the series. Despite this, the images are devoid of explicit pain or hostility beyond the threat of death in general. Any such connotations are appended in the verse.

The correspondences between the text and image of “Death the Painter” are many, but crucial elements resist duplication (more visibly so because of the other similarities).



Baskin, *Death the Painter* (1995).

The poem begins in the ekphrastic mode: the “Snub-nosed” figure is depicted in the picture, but “bone fingered” is for once not evident in the woodcut. This character’s final attribute in this first line, “deft with engraving tools,” would in fact more accurately describe Baskin himself than his engraved portrayal of death holding a paintbrush and palette. The painter-speaker subsequently claims that:

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. (*LP* 128)

It is most visible in the self-reflexive imagetexts about the activities used to create them, but this entire series strives to reveal the ubiquity of violent metaphors and etymologies in the English language. The subjects rendered by this grim artist are “arrested,” and Hecht alludes to his own “Still Life” poem, which equally explored arrested action and the danger and death that are also insinuated in the idea of permanent stasis.

Like its painterly counterpart, “Death the Copperplate Engraver” is one of few woodcuts with visual props or a recognisable setting. The clothed skeleton works a substantial printing apparatus, of which the threaded central screw resembles the spinal bones that appear in similar centralised and vertical positions in the other woodcuts.



Baskin, *Death the Copperplate Printer* (1995).

The poem continues Hecht's exploitation of puns and double meanings, concentrating on mechanical killing and the growing pressure of impending death, as the speaker threatens "To press my truth full home, force you to feel / The brevity of your days" (*LP* 141).⁴² The brevity of one's days exists in direct contrast to the "immortality of the art object" (*Obbligati* 248), and the temporal abstraction of death. In these poems that combine image and text, the potential refuge offered in the visual art object is confronted with its opposite extreme as art becomes an analogue and a vehicle for violence itself. "Death the Copperplate Engraver" continues:

⁴² "Metaphors in the opening stanzas are borrowed from emblems, some of them identified by Rosemund Tuve in *A Reading of George Herbert*, where she writes of 'the use of a set of conceits clustered around the ancient symbol of Christ as the miraculous grape-bunch,' and remarks that this is 'closely connected with various other symbols and conceits: Christ in the winepress of the cross.' Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen's brown ink drawing, *Allegory of the Sacrifice of the Mass* (*The Age of Bruegel*, National Gallery of Art) employs the same conceit in visual form. 'Dutch bath' is the name of a mordant used in copperplate etching; it is composed of dilute hydrochloric acid mixed with chlorate of potash. Saint Margaret Clitherow (1536- 1586), a devout Roman Catholic convert from the Anglican Church, was pressed to death with an 800-pound weight for harboring Catholic clergy" (qtd. in Hecht's note in *Collected Later Poems* 241).

My lightest touch can kill,
My costly first impressions can subdue.

Slowly I crank my winch, and the bones crack,
The skull splits open and the ribs give way.

Who, then, thinks to endure?

Confess the artistry of my attack. (*LP* 141)

If a verbal text attempts to emulate the visual arts in the ekphrastic mode, a peculiar diachronic event is said to take place: “the translation of temporal flux into the stasis of the visual arts saves action from the impermanence and death that all time-objects suffer” (Steiner 41). Hecht’s refusal to bear artistic shields against suffering and death is intensified in his own multimodal works. Rather than to bestow temporal immunity, the total combination of the imagetext permits Hecht and Baskin to emphasise precisely the universality of the death suffered by “time-objects” (such mortals as those impersonated, or mocked, here). This fact of human ephemerality is presented in contrast to the visually intransient and ubiquitous image of death, being consistently and statically pictured throughout the work. These imagetexts are emblems of the “attack” that is advanced by “artistry.”

Conclusion

This investigation has endeavoured to delineate the poetic methods and violent implications of Hecht's production and reproduction of images. His poetry is productive in its staging of embattled ways of seeing or representing the external world, and in its unrelenting effort to bring about visible collisions between images and violence, but it does not provide fixed answers to these questions. It is hoped therefore, that this study of his work also informs more general discussions about the ethics of aesthetics, and the variously fraught or fecund interactions between words and images. However, its contribution to the relatively slim body of scholarship on one of the most important and incisive poets of the twentieth century is of equal importance.

It is written at a point in time when more and more material relating to Hecht is coming to light. A selection of poems under the title of "Uncollected Hecht" was published in the September 2011 edition of *Poetry*, introduced by David Yezzi. Six unpublished poems of Hecht's were also recently collected, along with four others that have appeared elsewhere, in *Interior Skies: Late Poems from Liguria* (2011). This book, a fine edition limited to seventy-five numbered copies from Two Ponds Press, also contains engravings by Abigail Rorer that, although Hecht was not involved in their production, enrich his relationship with imagetexts. A second publication that specifically enriches Hecht's dealings with art is the collection of his correspondence with the architectural historian William MacDonald, which is edited by Philip Hoy and due for release in 2013. Also at the beginning of that year, a volume of Hecht's *Selected Letters* will appear. Advance copies of some of his

correspondence have been incorporated here, but the totality of that resource will be crucial for future Hecht scholars.

In a letter to J. D. McClatchy, Hecht describes his own experience of the artworks he encountered at the psychiatric hospital in which he spent some months following his divorce: “The chief point about them was that they were non-representational, and would not remind any patient of anything that carried an emotional burden” (qtd. in “Anatomies of Melancholy” 198). This statement is suggestive of the psychological impact of images in general, since these abstract works on the walls of the ward cause Hecht to think about their purpose, the motive behind their exhibition, and their eventual effects on target viewers, whether or not this was successful in his own case. But Hecht, more importantly, implies with this statement that representational images remind their beholders of things, irrespective of what the images were intended to represent, which carry “emotional burden.” His poems attempt to imbue images with emotional burden, or to amplify that quality as it is already present, and to analyse what that process involves and what it means.

His often troubled speakers are determined to “look and look, / As though I could be saved simply by looking” (“The Venetian Vespers” (*EP* 247)) or may seek “refuge in painting” (*Laws of the Poetic Art* 26). Hecht’s poetry tests what happens when something disturbing intrudes upon their line of sight, displacing reassuring visual details and the grace offered in art objects. In the majority of cases, images are both intruded upon and the intruding agents. But the most intense peripeteia occurs when precisely those artistic images reveal themselves to be the products or mediums of violent activity. That is, in itself, a violent moment, and one that is animated by the words that supply the image. Hecht’s verse both provides and describes such confrontations.

This is because the poet is interested in what images do, as well as being tasked with their poetic provision. His verse dramatizes the various activities of images. These would include the effect of images and looking upon the individual psyche, either in the possible redemption through attention to detail, or in traumatic instances of witnessing or ghostly recurrence. It also involves the ability of images to figuratively “stop history in its tracks” (“Dichtung und Wahrheit,” *EP* 113), and the ways art and artists attempt to divorce themselves from the aggressive workings of culture. Images, additionally, exhibit a strange relationship with words, whereby each is able to activate or antagonise the other. That antagonism feeds in to the possibility of images acting as vehicles for violence.

The poet’s fascination with the beauty available in the images of culture is embroiled with his consciousness of the inhumanity they might depict or participate in. Hecht advocates historical and ethical awareness where art images are concerned, and forces attention upon the simultaneously alluring and threatening power of images in general.

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