

Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

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ANTHONY HECHT, **The Darkness and the Light**, New York, Alfred A. Knopf 2001, pp. 67, \$ 10,50; **Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry**, Baltimora, Johns Hopkins University Press 2003, pp. 304, \$ 24,95.

The title of Anthony Hecht's latest volume, *The Darkness and the Light*, suggests a fine balance between positive and negative values, between good and evil. The cover itself is neatly divided between light and dark: the upper portion shows a detail from a luminous fresco by Tiepolo, *Angel Preventing the Sacrifice of Isaac*, while beneath it a dark photograph, in murky greys and blacks, shows silhouetted soldiers engaged in battle. However, once one enters the world of the poems contained in the volume, the sensation is inescapable that it is the forces of darkness that prevail. Indeed, even the Bible scene from the cover-painting, we soon find out, is far from being as radiantly joyful as the painter's style may suggest. In *Venetian Vespers*, Hecht had paid homage to Tiepolo's skill in rendering the «splendor of the insubstantial»; however, the episode that the artist depicts here, for all the frothy brilliance of his style, is full of grim substance, the full weight of which is explored in a sequence of three poems in the volume, under the general title *Sacrifice*. These poems are just three among many in the volume which present Biblical stories, treated in a variety of manners, ranging from a philologically faithful reproduction of the vocabulary and manner of the original text, to ironic updating. In *the case of Sacrifice Hecht* combines the two modes; the first two poems in the sequence present the episode from the points of view of Abraham and Isaac, with unembarrassed recourse to Biblical vocabulary and, in the case of Abraham, an unsettling adoption of the structure of a psalm of praise. The third poem, entitled simply 1945, presents a brief but powerful narrative that echoes the Bible story resonantly and disturbingly. It recounts an apparently minor episode during the German retreat from France in which a farming family hid their precious bicycle from the risk of German depredation in the orchard; the climax of the story comes when a German soldier, knowing the family must possess such a vehicle, points his rifle at the eldest son and shouts aloud «what was certainly meant / To be his terminal order: BICYCLETTE!»

It was still early on a chilly morning.

The water in the tire-treads of the road

Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,

Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves

The very grass was a stiff lead-crystal gray, Though splendidly prismatic where the sun

Made its slow way between the lingering shadows

Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.

This recalls other moments in Hecht's poetry, where the sensitivity to the visual splendours of the world seems to offer momentary but significant relief, if not redemption, from its horrors – perhaps never more significantly than in the final section of his Holocaust poem, *Rites and Ceremonies*. However, in this case, this moment of suspension has grim narrative significance; the poem proceeds: «There was leisure enough to take full note of this / In the most minute detail as the soldier held / Steady his index finger on the trigger ». The gun is never fired. The boy, like Isaac, is spared. However, the poet tells us that the family's «long silence» was to continue «agonized, unviolated» for years to come. No accusing finger is pointed by the poet; the searing trauma is left to speak for itself.

As the Tiepolo fresco seems to suggest, and as the excruciating clarity of the descriptive passage above confirms, light itself is by no means invariably positive in its associations. One especially powerful poem, a kind of summation of Hecht's skill in creating evocative landscapes, is entitled *Despair*. It consists of three stanzas, each depicting a landscape suggestive of a particular emotion; the first two depict «Sadness» and «Gloom», with, respectively, a dim, fog-swathed scene and a subway of «tiled and aging light».

However, the landscape of «Despair» is mid-afternoon in «the worn bank of a dry arroyo», with a «startled lizard ... exposed / To the full glare of relentless marigold sunshine».

However, it would be unfair to suggest that the volume is as unremittingly bleak as these quotations might suggest. Elsewhere, effects – or tricks – of the light do offer moments of genuine consolation or even glimpses of transcendental possibilities. These can occur in the most unlikely settings, as in the opening poem, where «oily patches» on the water of an industrial port suggest the «surfaces of Florentine bronze», and offer a «miracle of colors» to the viewer. In the poem *Memory*, a claustrophobic Victorian-style interior is given the blessing of a «dusty gleam of temporary wealth» when, «on sunny days toward midsummer / The brass andirons caught a shaft of light / For twenty minutes in late afternoon...» It is true that these transformative moments seem to occur most often in memory, but they are no less precious for that. Indeed, as a poem sardonically entitled *Lot's Wife* puts it, «Who can resist the charms of retrospection?»

Who, indeed, when retrospection offers such marvellous visions as «The iridescent labyrinth of the spider, / Its tethered tensor nest of polygons / Puffed by the breeze to a little bellying sail»? As these lines suggest, Hecht has lost none of his love for the elaborate pleasures of the 'high style'. Indeed, the fastidious might even feel there are moments when his love of elaboration takes him too far, with such playfully punning phrases as «a weakened, weekend father», «The ring-a-ding Ding-an-Sich», «The annual rings and wrongs that wring my withers...» However, Hecht, like his early master, Auden, has never denied the essential ludic component in poetry, which also implies a readiness to

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abide by the formal rules (Frost's tennis-net), however arbitrary they may occasionally seem. As the British poet Glyn Maxwell has put it: «The work of Anthony Hecht shatters the cosy notion that a fragmented, fractured age should be reflected in the forms of its art, that ugliness and shapelessness demand payment in kind». Although not untroubled by post-Adorno moments of guilt at engaging in poetry after Auschwitz, Hecht has always finally come down in favour of the healing qualities of great art; the high style may have its faults of overindulgence but it is also a product of civilisation and, at its best, of genuine thought and feeling. Richard Wilbur, in a fine Ballade for Hecht's eightieth birthday, described him as a poet «in whose darkest verse one sees / How style and agile intellect / Can both instruct and greatly please».

These qualities are fully in evidence also in his recent book of essays, *Melodies Unheard*. In addition to offering some superb close readings of poems by Hopkins, Frost and Bishop, he devotes several essays to the possibilities offered by particular forms, such as the sonnet and the sestina, and concludes the book with two wide-ranging essays, *On Rhyme* and *The Music of Forms*. In these essays we can see the supreme craftsman pondering on the tools of his trade; Hecht's technical mastery – since the death of James Merrill – is rivalled only by that of his contemporary, Richard Wilbur. The book ends with a tribute to the art of criticism itself, which, if exercised with «care, tact, and delicacy», can help us to understand the ways that the music of forms works upon us. Dismissing a claim by William Stafford that analysing poetry is «like boiling a watch to see what makes it tick», Hecht states with confidence that the better poetry is, «the sturdier it becomes under inspection». There is no doubt that Hecht's own poetry, so solidly founded in experience and thought and so caringly embellished with all the grace and splendour that the forms of poetic tradition offer, proves his point perfectly.

Gregory Dowling

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