

CHASM, HOPE AND POETRY

Peter Steele SJ

7th August, 2001

Time was when Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country' was amongst the most widely-known of Australian poems. It was published originally in the London *Spectator*, in 1908, under its then title, 'Core of My Heart.' That phrase, as some will remember, begins two of the poem's six stanzas, and it is deeply appropriate to the celebratory ethos of the whole lyric. Mackellar is indeed taking her country to her heart, and as far as may be, fusing them.

In our present context, I am most struck by the line in the poem in which the poet names, in her tally of things found loveable about Australia, 'Her beauty and her terror.' At moments when the words were more than part of a chant, these must have given many a person pause. 'Her beauty', yes – part of beauty's office is to elicit love: but 'her terror'? What is going on here?

Perhaps what is going on is something after the fashion of Dante's 'Love is a lord of terrible aspect', or of Yeats' conclusion after the Easter 1916 rebellion in Dublin, 'A terrible beauty is born.' Such sayings are in part enigmatic, if not paradoxical: but they are certainly not perverse, and in some circumstances they seem inescapable. They attest a convergence of experiences, of realizations, which seem to have come from different poles, but which cannot any longer be had apart. And some such sayings – which may in fact be whole poems, or whole bodies of poems – claim insistently that what is being talked about is by no means a thing striking but separate – 'My country' – but rather an intimate understanding and response – 'Core of my heart.'

If we think for a moment either of the beautiful or of the terrible we may say that it is chasm-like, is chasmal. Each makes a clean break, and a deep one, with the commonplace. As to the beautiful, where the pretty or the handsome is all very well, the beautiful astounds, is an abruption. Stravinsky, seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time, said 'That's serious', and even if he was joking,

serious it is, seriously other or utter, as indeed Stravinsky's music can be. The beautiful is 'serious' in that way, is absolute: it does not abide our question. And it goes on being like that even when attention is indifferent or attention's language is impaired. I was not helped, for instance, a few months ago, when at the end of an airline flight the attendant wished us all an 'awesome weekend': but awe can survive such trivializations, and so can the beautiful. If it is not something like a chasm, it is not beauty after all.

Some would say, rightly I think, that awe at this chasmal character of the beautiful is at least in part awe at intensity of being itself. That a thing can be *so*, that a thing can be *at all*, may impinge on one's consciousness with a kind of leonine fierceness. Wittgenstein says at one point, 'not how the world is, but that it is – that is the mystical', and even if one does not take kindly to talk about mysticism, the sheer thereness of what need not have been there, and one day will not be there, may have the character of a thunderclap. Art, as I take it, hears that thunderclap, and attests it memorably. And art's recurrent allegiance to the beautiful, in spite of the many travesties and simulacra of the beautiful, is partly because of being's radiation, its self-discharge and self-disclosure. Beauty is a sign of being's towering from nothingness.

That last word, though, brings me to another, more common, implication of the word 'chasm' – the gulf not between nothingness and being in its splendour, but between any being at all and its being undone, its coming to nothing. All of us encounter this every day, whether or not we notice it. It goes by many names. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these is the word 'mortality', a word which Shakespeare uses to name not only the hour of our death and our approximations to that, but the whole ensemble of our delimitations. But even when we are not looking at the complete playing out of that hand, we are familiar with the many forms of coping in which we engage simply to stay 'in being'. Nourishment and shelter, transportation and occupation, keeping our wits about us while having that condition serve us rather than master us, standing open to other human beings but not being overwhelmed by them – these and many other habits and practices make up, and take up, much of our very lives. Some of us, blessedly, proceed with considerable serenity

through the process, much of the time: but even they walk the parapet of being, every day.

And then there is the chasm which, notoriously, grips the attention of some people more than others – the chasm between good and evil. If goodness is unplumbable, as I believe it to be, evil may at least seem to be so, too. In the only cosmos of which we have any experience, human beings, uniquely, cope as best they may with this chasm too. Much of the time that coping is, in John Henry Newman's phrase, a 'night battle', though it is certainly not always a matter, in Matthew Arnold's words, of ignorant armies clashing by night. The dividing lines, and the no-man's-land, are sometimes public and patent: sometimes, by contrast, they run through individual human hearts, in utter privacy. But not to know of their existence, and not to see at least some of their pertinence, is to be what moralists have called, appropriately, a 'moral imbecile'. At the opposite pole of human experience is the person, or the community, deeply versed in the contours of good and the contours of evil, and given consciously to choices between them. In some happier world than our own one would assume that the moral finesse would all tell in the direction of the good: but as few people here will need reminding, evil too has its partisans.

So far, all my talk has been of 'chasm', but I have had my other terms of reference in mind throughout. We will come to 'hope' in a little while. Much of what I now have to say will turn on two poems by a man whose work, from his earliest years as a poet to the present, has been addressing the 'three chasms' – between the commonplace and the beautiful, between being and nothingness, and between good and evil. I am speaking of the American poet Anthony Hecht, to whose work I have been personally indebted for decades, with the debt growing steadily deeper as I grow older. Let me begin by reading his poem, 'Auguries of Innocence':

A small, unsmiling child,
Held upon her shoulder,
Stares from a photograph
Slightly out of kilter.
It slipped from a loaded folder

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

Where the income tax was filed.
The light seems cut in half
By a glum, October filter.

Of course, the child is right.
The unleafed branches knot
Into hopeless riddles behind him
And the air is clearly cold.
Given the stinted light
To which fate and film consigned him,
Who'd smile at his own lot
Even at one year old?

And yet his mother smiles.
Is it grown-up make-believe,
As when anyone takes your picture
Or some nobler, Roman virtue?
Vanity? Folly? The wiles
That some have up their sleeve?
A proud and flinty stricture
Against showing that things can hurt you,

Or a dark, Medean smile?
I'd be the last to know.
A speechless child of one
Could better construe the omens,
Unriddle our gifts for guile.
There's no sign from my son.
But it needs no Greeks or Romans
To foresee the ice and snow.¹

The title of this poem is itself a quotation, after William Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence'. Blake's poem, a hundred and thirty lines long, consists mainly of four-beat couplets, each of them a dictum of sorts, some of which have attained celebrity in their own right – for instance, 'The strongest poison ever known/ Came from Caesar's laurel crown', or 'If the sun and moon should doubt/ They'd immediately go out', or 'The harlot's cry from street to street/ Shall weave old England's winding sheet.' It is far from

¹ ' "Auguries of Innocence" ', *Millions of Strange Shadows* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), p.35.

clear why these dicta are in just the order in which they are set down by Blake: and in fact at least one editor has reorganized the poem: but what is clear is the air of urgency, and sometimes of violence, which pervades the whole.

Hecht's poem is much shorter, is stanzaic, is in a different metre, and, where Blake's poem is made up entirely of verdicts, the later poem is mainly negotiating a question. But it too is urgent, urgent to know what can be known, and urgent to say what can be said. Its title, as is often the case with Hecht, is provocatively laden: 'Auguries of Innocence' can mean either what we are to make of innocence or what innocence is to make of events. The 'small, unsmiling child' of the first line, who is also the 'speechless child of one' of the last stanza, summons in his silence, and is a kind of augur of the photograph's omens – is, in fact, a medium of the ominous. Untroubled himself, so far as we know, he is deeply troubling. Virgil, in his Fourth Eclogue, says '*Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem*' – 'Little boy, begin to know your mother by a smile': and the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

A baby is called to self-consciousness by the love and smile of his mother. It is, in fact, the horizon of infinite Being in its totality which opens up to him in this meeting. It reveals four things to him: (1) that he is *one* in love with his mother, and yet he is not his mother, and so Being is *one*, (2) this love is *good*, and so the whole of Being is good; (3) that this love is *true*, and so Being is *true*, (4) this love is a cause of *joy*, and so Being is beautiful.²

For Balthasar as for Virgil the mother's smile is both a good thing and a good omen: but in Hecht's poem, at least so far as the child is concerned, the mother smiles in vain. More than that: the father, gazing back at the photograph, does not know why she smiles: it might be for harmless reasons, for ignoble ones, or for tragic ones – that 'dark Medean smile' is fraught with the gravest of possibilities. In short, we have to do here with something

² q. in 'Youthful Unto Death: The Spirit of Childhood', John Saward, in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Bede McGregor OP and Thomas Norris (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 147.

chasmal, with one variant of the chasm between being and nothingness, namely the gap between how things are and what they mean. Hecht is a master, sometimes a great master, of striking representation, which he can carry off either with a baroque plenitude or, as here, with a stark economy: ‘the unleafed branches’ and ‘the stinted light’, for instance, carry much in little. But as often as not what he renders in representation is charged with a sense of the unsaid, and even of the unsayable. It is as if whatever it is that grounds the things or events described is falling away from them: or as if whatever it is that, surely, they must in their vividness be pressing to say is after all put to silence. Hopkins refers in an alarmed poem to what he calls the mind’s ‘cliffs of fall/ frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed’: Hecht, in quieter mode, is also dealing here with just such cliffs of fall.

I pause here to make the point that this poem does have to do with each of the three ‘chasmal’ realities to which I have referred. It pays tribute, and is the tribute it pays, to beauty as an austere distinctive reality. Each of its four stanzas is poised, lucid, an accomplished ‘still’, which also signals that it is charged with a significance which it is fearful of divulging but is incapable of ignoring. Secondly, it is literally true that no single line in the poem is without allusion, direct or indirect, to the depredations of nothingness, to that radical ‘suspense’, or suspendedness, in which, from one instant to another, we exist. And thirdly, “‘Auguries of Innocence’” is keyed increasingly, as it unfolds, to the dire matter of good and evil, of goods and of ills. That ‘dark, Medean smile’ may be of the same order of allusion as, say, ‘a saturnine expression’: but the legendary Medea is generally remembered not only for reasons of dramatic comeliness but as the sorceress who, deserted by Jason, is the killer of their children. Chasm, we may say, gives this poem its appointment, and the poem’s business is to make what it can of that fact.

This is by no means the whole story where Hecht’s poetry is concerned, but it is an important part of the story. The formidable pathos of his poetry lies in its remarkable relationship between command and vulnerability. In “‘Auguries of Innocence’”, the photograph itself signals this: either it or its burden is ‘slightly out of kilter’: it ‘slipped from a loaded folder/ Where the income tax was filed’ – no grandeur there: it is itself the product of ‘fate and

film'. But this cheap, mislaid scrap of paper also precipitates a reflective questioning which presses towards such verdicts as make up Blake's poem – verdicts which, though themselves often gnomic, help to settle the unsettled mind. And on the matter of settlement and unsettlement, I note that while the four stanzas of Hecht's poem are firmly and formally rhymed, no two have the same rhyme-structure: as if the ear's being re-keyed from point to point is the cue for the mind's being re-keyed. Hecht's poetry rarely allows us to 'take it as read', and this is because the last thing he wants of experience is that it should be 'taken as read'. He hopes, rather, that it may be read anew.

I think that this hope, the hope for a freshened attentiveness, is a hallmark of genuine poetry. Spurious, or feeble, poetry, has no such hope, being content instead with delivering commonplaces which may indeed be vividly decorated with the cosmetics of elation, anger or dismay, but which lack challenge to intellect, to imagination, or to ethos. Almost all the memorable poetry I know deals by contrast with mixed feelings: with the bright or dark labyrinths of world, word and mind: with that swirling but significant ensemble of events classically alluded to in the traditional formula of the marriage vows – life's own diurnal 'for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer', and so on. One asks for more of poetry, of course, than the attestation that things are all very complicated, which all of us have seen for ourselves. One asks for stylishness amidst the blur, a degree of brio while entropy has its way, and at least a measure of beauty, even if that must be, in Yeats's words, 'beauty like a tightened bow.' In claiming that Anthony Hecht hopes that experience be not simply 'taken as read' in poetry but be 'read anew', this is what I have in mind: and this is what he commonly provides.

It seems to me that this orientation towards experience's being 'read anew' remains perpetual within a poem. True, for thousands of years poets have spoken of their work, in that work, as though it would endure even amidst the storms of time: and the fact that we can still read them saying so proves that, so far, they have been right. But what that work now speaks of, as it did when first written, is the usual human wrestle with definition which will not be crushing and aspiration which will not be evasive. Inside the poem's diamond there can be sensed still the tumults, the fleeting

lucidities, and the hankerings for harmony which gave rise to it in the first place. A good poem, even a great one, is eerily ‘normal’, in that it sheds an intense light on where, necessarily and permanently, we are. Its conduct, and its predicament, are like those of our bodies; the same conduct, and the same predicament, are like those of our spirits.

And in body as in spirit we do go on revisiting, we do go on revising, experience thus far. To live at all is a deeply revisionary matter – otherwise none of us could ever have left the infantile, or the juvenile, or the adolescent, condition, or have left them except for futility: and none of us could have learned dialect or alphabet and landed by consequence anywhere except on the Peninsula of Self-preening. Life’s hope, whatever the flags waved, is that this revisionary process will neither ossify nor evaporate, but will have some identifiable coherence, which will claim credibility, will give some pleasure, and will call praise forth. In other words, life’s hope is for those ancient transcendental values, the One, the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. Most poems I care about have a stake in this quest: but they proceed with the customary human raggedness along the trail.

Hecht himself, in a long discussion of his work, refers to ‘something that in the end is really quite mysterious: how art can somehow include the sordors and anguishes of life and yet accomodate them in some utterly benign and satisfying pattern.’³ He has better warrant than most for raising the question, in that many of his own poems, from first to last, have tried to keep faith with both of those dimensions. At the one extreme there are those vilenesses and violations which so profoundly insult the human that one would ordinarily be robbed of any appropriate words: at the other, there are those hard-won reachings for song, those fingerings of light in darkness, for which his poetry is deservedly celebrated. If, in the presence of his poetry, one wants as I do to allude to hope, this can never be in any formulaic spirit. Hecht, after all, is the man who, in a rendition of Voltaire’s ‘Poem Upon the Lisbon Disaster’, reporting the elements of a last prayer of a caliph, says, ‘He might have added *hope* to his grim list.’⁴ I have

³ *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (London: Between The Lines, 1999) p. 91.

⁴ ‘Poem upon the Lisbon Disaster’, *Millions of Strange Shadows*, p. 66.

in mind rather something said by the poet Peter Porter, whom nobody could accuse of being easily sanguine. Porter writes, with George Crabbe in mind, 'For a poet his hope and his benison will usually be his energy. What he has to say is often possessed by gloom, but he becomes of the party of hope if he pronounces it with energy and art. How he does so is a great and unexplained mystery.'⁵

'Hope' is in fact a challenging, troubling word. Libraries could be stocked with writings – philosophical, theological, psychological and so forth – about the exercise of hope and its outcomes. These writings come in all imaginative and intellectual hues. Samuel Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' is among them, but so is *Tristram Shandy*; the Second Vatican Council's key document 'Joy and Hope' belongs there, but so does Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Denied*. The very fact that the matter can be pitched so variously means that almost everything will have to be left out in what I say here. But there is still point in taking next a poem which is explicitly about the questionable negotiation of hope, a poem this time not by Hecht but by his slightly younger contemporary, W.S. Merwin, another poet for whose work 'chasm' seems an appropriate term, however evenly the language proceeds or quietly the rifts open.

To My Father's Houses

Each of you must have looked like hope to him
once at least however long it lasted
he who claimed he saw hope in every grim
eyeless gray farmhouse uninhabited
on a back road and hope surely was needed
every time they were shown into the bare
resonant rooms of the manse provided
by his next church and looked around to where
their lives would wake and they would never own
where they woke and he managed to buy you
never to live in though he thought he might
and projected you onto his days one

⁵ Peter Porter, *Saving from the Wreck: Essays on Poetry* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 2001), p.98.

by one in the borrowed house they came to
for the last years until the sheet went white.⁶

As is clear from the poem, Merwin's father was a Christian clergyman, a fact which establishes resonances around the poem's title. In the *Gospel According to John*, Jesus is reported as saying to his immediate followers, 'In my Father's house there are many abodes: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.' Such a promise is calculated to stretch the heart in hope. In Merwin's poem, the title 'To My Father's Houses' has as it turns out an ironically sombre sense, in that neither the next manse nor the next church offers that sense of arrival, of vindication, which the older Merwin might have expected, if only as a token of a more definitive, post-mortal housing. More than that, 'To My Father's Houses' figures not only the objects of hope, but hope itself. We are offered at best a provisional hope, something 'claimed', often against the grain, in improbable circumstances. Merwin's father is, as we might say, a professional hoper, in the sense that without his professing hope his official Christian standing would be vacuous. But for him, as for anyone else, the achieving of hope, and its exercise, are as nuanced and distinctive as, say, the achieving and the exercise of love. What Merwin is about, as poet, is trying to catch the note of his father's hoping – its timbre, its ring. At the same time, and for all the filial and fraternal spirit of the venture, it remains true that there is an irreducible privacy about the father's pursuit. The contrast between the father's communal, and communitarian, vocation and the man's unbreachable solitude serves to fashion the poem's pathos.

There is another point to be made here, which is this. The poem's last words are, '....until the sheet went white.' In the first instance this refers to the metaphorical bedsheet on which, as in home movies of a certain period, the houses of hope were projected. But Merwin, virtually always and everywhere, is a poet of absences and vanishings, and in particular of the evanescence of language itself. That being so, it does not seem to me to be forcing a construction to see the 'sheet' in this case as also being, by

⁶ W.S. Merwin, 'To My Father's Houses', *New York Review of Books*, April 12, 2001 (Vol XLVIII, No. 6), p.32.

implication, the page itself: as though the very words in which a reading is given of the father's privations themselves vanish.

If this is so, it tends to intensify one's sense of the father's fragility: he is indeed standing beside the chasm of nothingness – nothing as to identity, nothing as to meaning. But even if you find this an over-reading of the situation, the poem itself remains an eloquent statement of vulnerability in privacy. And indeed, for all its distinctiveness, 'For My Father's Houses' is one of the countless modern poems whose keynote, as well as whose theme, is that of solitude. Its allusions to other human beings are of the slightest: its dealings with the world's physicalities are close to chimerical. Whatever of hope is adduced here is apparently more in virtue of will rather than in response to any promise. It is as if the father's exertions are those of a sad and bereft Titan.

There are, however, solitudes and solitudes. The father of Merwin's poem – and heaven knows what resemblance, if any, he bears to the historical individual – is as I have indicated about as 'extra-historical' as one can well imagine. By contrast with this, attempts to correlate hope and the historical have abounded during the last fifty or so years. In a substantially bleak poem of Anthony Hecht's, 'Black Boy in the Dark', he refers, not without irony, to monumental figures outside a typical small-town library, the figures of History and Hope.⁷ Seamus Heaney, thinking as usual of the roiling angers in the north of Ireland, writes 'History says, *Don't hope/ On this side of the grave,/ But then, once in a lifetime/ The longed-for tidal wave/ Of justice can rise up,/ And hope and history rhyme,*' and Nadine Gordimer, in a collection of essays largely bearing on justice and injustice in our time and well beyond her place, adopts Heaney's fragment as epigraph for a book called *Living in Hope and History*.⁸ Jack Holland, writing of a milieu all-too-well known to Heaney, calls a book *Hope Against History: The Ulster Conflict*.⁹

⁷ Hecht, 'Black Boy in the Dark', *Millions of Strange Shadows*, p.6.

⁸ Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999).

⁹ Jack Holland, *Hope Against History: The Ulster Conflict* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999).

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

The list could, with a sad facility, be extended. My reason for mentioning it here is that, whereas the fate of hope in Merwin's poem is couched entirely in terms of a solitary man's negotiations, for many others the issue of hope or its absence is addressed in the larger milieu of public being – in other words, what we ordinarily understand by the word 'history'. And here, as it seems to me, Hecht's conduct is instructive. Having written, earlier, one of the classically bleak poems dealing with Nazi heartlessness and monstrosity, 'More Light! More Light!',¹⁰ and having, in 'Rites and Ceremonies',¹¹ contemplated at length the assailing of Jews over the bitter centuries, he now schools himself anew in the unspeakable. By contrast with Merwin, and with (for instance) Dan Pagis,¹² or the much more recent Australian Jacob G. Rosenberg,¹³ he makes his move by addressing a world which is in one way dense, in another attenuated. The poem principally at issue here is called 'Persistences.'

The leafless trees are feathery,
A foxed, Victorian lace,
Against a sky of milk-glass blue,
Blank, washed-out, commonplace.

Between them and my window
Huge helices of snow
Perform their savage, churning rites
At seventeen below.

The obscurity resembles
A silken Chinese mist
Wherein through calligraphic daubs
Of artistry persist

Pocked and volcanic gorges,
Clenched and arthritic pines,

¹⁰ Hecht, "More Light! More Light!", *The Hard Hours* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 64.

¹¹ Hecht, 'Rites and Ceremonies', *The Hard Hours*, p.38.

¹² Dan Pagis, *Variable Directions: The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. Stephen Mitchess (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989).

¹³ Jacob G. Rosenberg, *Behind the Moon* (Wollongong: Five Islands Press, 2000).

Faint, coral-tinted herons' legs
 Splashing among the tines

Of waving, tasselled marshgrass,
 Deep pools aflash with sharp,
Shingled and burnished armor-plate
 Of sacred, child-eyed carp.

This dimness is dynastic,
 An ashen T'ang of age
Or blur that grudgingly reveals
 A ghostly equipage,

Ancestral deputations
 Wound in the whited air,
To whom some sentry flings a slight,
 Prescriptive, 'who goes there?'

Are these the apparitions
 Of enemies or friends?
Loved ones from whom I once withheld
 Kindnesses or amends

On preterite occasions
 Now lost beyond repeal?
Or the old childhood torturers
 Of undiminished zeal,

Adults who ridiculed me,
 Schoolmates who broke my nose,
Risen from black, unconscious depths
 Of REM repose?

Who comes here seeking justice,
 Or in its high despite,
Bent on some hopeless interview
 On wrongs nothing can right?

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

Those throngs disdain to answer,
 Though numberless as flakes;
Mine is the task to find out words
 For their memorial sakes

Who press in dense approaches,
 Blue numeral tattoos
Writ crosswise on their arteries,
 The burning, voiceless Jews.¹⁴

I have no idea how the Dorothea Mackellar of 'My Country' would respond not, this time, to the 'beauty and the terror' of her remembered Australia, but to the beauty and the terror instanced in Hecht's poem: but the fact is that, for him, you cannot have the one, historically speaking, without the other. You cannot have them, that is to say, within the terms of the poem. I am certainly not of that party which claims that poetry, like the rest of literature, is cordoned off from the rest of human events or human truths: but I do urge that the poetical imagination be granted its right to construe the world and its events at its own rate and on its own terms. Any poet worth reading will, at least sometimes, be keenly attentive to the brute realities of the world: but any poem worth writing will construe those realities, and others besides, with a certain unbridled originality.

Elaine Scarry, in her recent book called *On Beauty and Being Just*, reflects on a crucial moment in *The Odyssey*, when the vulnerable and exposed Odysseus is astounded by the beauty of the Nausicaa whom he sees for the first time. Scarry identifies three features of beauty on this occasion: that it is sacred, that it is unprecedented, and that it is lifesaving.¹⁵ The details of her discussion are not to our purpose here: but these three features are relevant to Hecht's poem. He actually uses the word 'sacred', of the carp, and 'rites' of the snow: but more significantly, his characterization of the winter's day has about it some of that singularity, that fascination, that awe and that nearness to the formidable which are often associated with the sacred: his winter

¹⁴ Hecht, 'Persistences', *The Venetian Vespers* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), p.30.

¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) p.23.

sky may be 'Blank, washed-out, commonplace', but it would be absurd to describe the poem's demeanour in that way. Secondly, the poem's elegance is there not so much for ostentation as to be a way of urging singularity; the many assonances, the pictorial and conceptual matchings, the very prominence of unpredictable rhymes – these make for a variable enchantment, a temporary retrieval of keen-eyed and keen-eared childlike attention, so that what is rendered is a world healed of banality. And thirdly, the poem's evident eloquence is indeed 'lifesaving', at least in the sense that it attests the worth of the things celebrated – says yes to them in despite not only of the ills and evils to which the latter half of the poem alludes, but also of nature's own innately drastic elements – the cold's savagery, the gorges' pocking, the ash of age.

All of this is important when one considers the effect of the poem as a whole. At the end of an earlier poem, thinking of his two small boys at play and his being cast by them in the role of hero, he reflects that he 'could not, at one time,/ Have saved them from the gas.'¹⁶ The same horrified bitterness is to be heard at the end of 'Persistences' – 'The burning, voiceless Jews' is not a line that allows for palliation. Nonetheless, there is an imaginative appropriateness in the way in which Hecht makes his way to the poem's conclusion. Essentially, he does two things before coming to the final confrontation: he gives us the company of both nature and art, and he gives us the company of the ethical world at large.

As to the first of these, in a way characteristic of his poetry as a whole, he delivers the details of the seen world both as things striking, touching or perturbing in their own right and as things seized for salutation by the ingenious and correlating mind. Hecht's is in the best sense deeply worldly poetry, ingrained by physicalities, while also being caught, in virtually the same gesture, by a profound sense of mentality as marrying the world. I think that this is always attractive, and usually impressive: but it has, within the drama of this poem, another role. Infamously, the 'burning, voiceless Jews' were as far as possible rendered world-less and mind-less by their persecutors and murderers. Over months or years their rights and liberties were first curtailed and then annulled: and in being made, as they gradually were,

¹⁶ Hecht, 'It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It.' *The Hard Hours*, p.67

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

voiceless in the conversation of humankind, they were deprived of what is, for most people, the principal resource not only for comradeship and fraternity but even for comprehension. In this poem, 'Persistences', Hecht is, as one might put it, both worlding and wording a moment anew: he cannot give the murdered back their lives, but he can in tributary homage offer them the world which has been stolen from them.

I said, too, that this poem 'gives us the company of the ethical world at large.' Perhaps the expression is ungainly, but it does point to a reality. In the poem, Hecht is visited by 'throngs' who, he surmises, might be those who have wronged him or have been wronged by him – persistent presences, at all events. He is conscious, before the denouement of the poem, of 'wrongs nothing can right', whosever those may be. (It is worth noting the fact that this being keyed, as though by instinct, to the ethical is far from automatic in modern poetry, for many of whose practitioners it would seem either quaint or archaic: so Hecht's adducing the matter is policy rather than convention.) As things turn out in the poem, Hecht acknowledges that he is charged to 'find out words/ For their memorial sakes', and plainly the poem itself is an instance of his keeping faith with that charge. The point that I want to make here is that, just as the poem attempts to re-match with the world those who have been expelled from the world, it also attempts to lodge the legions of the murdered in the company of all other people to whom injustices, slight or grave, have been done.

Of itself, this says little about the absolute distinctiveness of the Shoah. Much earlier, in fact, in his sequence 'Rites and Ceremonies', which has been on my mind and at my heart since I first read it in the 1960s, Hecht bound a contemplation of the Shoah in with cardinal moments of earlier historical Jewish affliction. But in 'Persistences', he is behaving very much as poets usually must – he is doing his best, in the face of something made the more intractable by his very precision in nominating it. When he says, 'Mine is the task to find out words/ For their memorial sakes', he is given his warrant from several quarters: from the *noblesse oblige* of that verbal skill which the poem itself has already evidenced; from the enemies, the friends, the young, and the old in his personal life who continue to claim attention;

and above all, his fellow Jews who may indeed be said to be, for him, all the more burning in their demand because of their very voicelessness.

I have believed for a long time that a major ethical issue for many if not for most people is, 'and what about the past?' It may be the personal past, the past of a few, the past of the majority, the past of all. We come to our own conclusions about the matter – or we evade conclusion. Hecht is a poet incapable of evading conclusion, as 'Persistences' testifies. The whole body of his work, which continues to be added to as he approaches eighty years of age, is governed by a peculiarly intense double commitment – to the aesthetic and to the ethical. He is aware, to an uncommon degree, how intimately these are related: and a poem like 'Persistences' is the fruit of that awareness.

It would perhaps be agreeable to end just at this point, but I want in effect to add a coda. In the *New York Review of Books* for November 2nd, last year, Hecht reviewed Yehuda Amichai's remarkable book-length suite of poems called *Open Closed Open*. By the time the review appeared, Amichai had died. I imagine that he would not have been displeased by the last paragraph of Hecht's review, which goes,

The poet's work is gently, modestly, amusedly heroic, and in its assembled totality it is nothing less than majestic. It is, moreover, unlike any poem from the past or present that I can think of. It does honor not only to the poet, and what he made of feeling, thought, cerebral cortex, cardiac chambers, his knowledge and his life, but to his people, celebrated here in loving, equivocal terms, and, in the poet's very name, Ami-chai, which, in Hebrew, means 'my people's lives.'¹⁷

To this I might add in parenthesis that it takes one to know one. But with Hecht's review, and Amichai's book in mind, it is not surprising that I was doubly struck by a short poem of Amichai's, come across at random in an issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1999. It is called 'After Auschwitz':

¹⁷ Hecht, 'Sentenced to Reality', *New York Review of Books*, November 2, 2000 (Vol. XLVII, No. 17), p.53

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

After Auschwitz, no theology:
From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises –
a sign the cardinals have chosen themselves a Pope.
From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises –
a sign the conclave of Gods hasn't yet chosen
the Chosen People.

After Auschwitz, no theology:
the inmates of extermination bear on their forearms
the telephone numbers of God,
numbers that do not answer
and now are disconnected, one by one.

After Auschwitz, a new theology:
the Jews who died in the Shoah
have now come to be like their God,
who has no likeness of a body and has no body.
They have no likeness of a body and they have no body.¹⁸

If Merwin's 'To My Father's Houses' offers a view of hope and its absence which is as near as may be entirely private, and if Hecht's 'Persistences' deals with this matter in a way which accommodates both the worldliness of physicality and the liveliness of mentality, Amichai's 'After Auschwitz' may be said to take a cosmic view, inasmuch as it gazes at the abolition of persons, the abolition of communication, and the abolition of at least the earlier form of that species of mentality known as theology. It concludes with a penetrating irony. The question I am left with is whether any good can come of such an irony.

¹⁸ Yehuda Amichai, 'After Auschwitz', *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1999 (Vol. 284, No.5), p. 58