

ANTHONY HECHT'S
CONTROLLED DISORDER



F L O R I A N G A R G A I L L O

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

— Anthony Hecht, “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este”

When critics talk about the purported self-containment of mid-century American verse, they often point to Anthony Hecht’s “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este,” from *A Summoning of Stones* (1954), as their chief example. The poem, it is said, turns away from the historical realities of postwar Europe in order to focus on its own artistic designs. Hecht is thus believed to offer a vision of art as controlled and hermetic, the Italian villa he depicts simply a metaphor for the poem and the poet’s work. While most admit that his later books, starting with *The Hard Hours* in 1967, take up a range of historical subjects, Hecht’s early writing has been seen —

is still widely seen – as all poetry qua poetry: the principles of New Criticism applied.

This argument has been as longstanding as it has been pervasive. To give a few examples, starting with the most recent: Edward Brunner, in his *Cold War Poetry* (2004), says of “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este” that it is “quintessential academic verse” typical of Hecht and of the 1950s more generally. “By demonstrating a poetry complicitous with the New Criticism,” he writes, “Hecht’s work exemplified that moment of high civilization of which the Villa d’Este is a supreme example.” Daniel Hoffman, in *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (1979), likewise asserts that “Hecht’s poem is an exploration of the aesthetic bequest of Europe, not of the terror or pity history had exacted in such places during the recent war.” We might go even farther back to one of Hecht’s earliest reviewers, Louise Bogan, who in 1954 wrote enthusiastically about his first book of poems while asserting these same distinctions:

Hecht, born in 1923, served as an infantry rifleman in Europe and Asia. He was awarded, in 1951, a writing fellowship to the American Academy at Rome. The second experience has evidently been more important in his poetic development than the first; he draws more freely upon the Italian scene than upon any background of war. And his verbal and technical brilliance is directed toward the celebration, rather than the dissection, of what he has felt and observed.

The commentaries on this poem are not all pejorative, but many are (Brunner’s “complicitous” suggests a vague conspiracy between Hecht and the New Critics), and many others at least imply that the young poet’s vision was narrowed by his indifference toward history, even if he is not to be censured for it. What I would like to do is argue against this common view of “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este.” I think we have done Hecht’s early writing – and by extension, midcentury poetry – a disservice by speaking of them in terms of self-containment. Instead of turning away from the world, his poem considers deeply the historical pressures that weigh down on the artist’s work. What’s more, Hecht makes a vigorous case for the artist’s need to reckon with these same forces, rather than ignore them.

I base this reading both on verbal details I think have been insufficiently attended to, and on historical facts about the Villa itself that Hecht's critics have yet to bring up in discussions of the poem. This latter point seems to me a peculiar oversight considering the impact that World War II had on Hecht's imagining of the gardens. Indeed, it matters to the poem immensely that the Villa d'Este was bombed during the war. The attack, though never referred to directly, is implicit everywhere in the language, and it allows Hecht to think about the pressures a poet must respond to if he is to write responsibly.

Let me begin by providing the contextual information that will be important to our reading of the poem.

The Villa d'Este, located in the town of Tivoli, twenty miles outside of Rome, was commissioned by the Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este when he became Governor in 1550. Ippolito died before construction was completed, however, leaving the work to be continued under various inheritors. The Italian government eventually bought the estate in 1920. By that point, the Villa d'Este had become widely celebrated for its historical and aesthetic importance – as both an exemplar of Italian Renaissance style, and a major influence on the development of European garden design beyond the sixteenth century. It was noted in particular for having one of the most expansive waterworks displays of any Italian garden, ranging from ornamental basins and fountains to cascades. Unfortunately, that reputation did little to protect it during World War II.

In June 1944, German soldiers were identified hiding in dugouts across Tivoli. The Allied forces launched an aerial attack soon after, causing not insubstantial harm to the Villa and its gardens. A report in the London *Times* dated 20 June reads: “The Villa d'Este received a direct hit, and the whole upper storey on one side of the courtyard was demolished. The hanging gardens, with their famous fountains and cascades, were relatively undamaged, although a big bomb burst on the top terrace, causing havoc among the trees and shrubs. The same bomb wrecked a dugout where some 30 Germans were sheltering. The bodies are now buried in a mass grave at the end of the terrace.” We also know from Gioacchino Mancini's book on the Villa d'Este that the bombs “caused severe damages to the water-pipes, resulting in the stopping of the

water supply to the various fountains.” Though considerable resources would be needed to restore the terrace and gardens to their former state, the importance of the Villa d’Este was such that restoration work began immediately after the war and was completed in 1946. That said, the bombing continued to feature in visitors’ guides to the area throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.

Anthony Hecht, as we saw from Louise Bogan, was an infantry rifleman during World War II. He was stationed in France, Germany, and Czechoslovakia – never Italy. But he did move to Rome when the American Academy awarded him a writing fellowship in 1951. It seems fair to assume that his visit to the Villa d’Este took place during that year, and that he wrote the poem describing its gardens over the following two years. What would a visitor have seen upon arriving at the Villa for the first time in 1951? A spectacular work of landscape architecture, to be sure, but one that had escaped ruin by mere accident rather than by design; in other words, a place still very much haunted by the attack it had suffered just seven years before. That sense would have been compounded by the fact that not all of Tivoli – and certainly not all of Italy – had been fully restored by 1951. In an article published in the *Quarterly Bulletin of Northwestern University Medical School* that same year, Dr. John Martin described Tivoli as “a little heap of bombed out rubble that had once been the proud summer homes of the Caesars.”

Hecht’s poem “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este” (to turn to that now) does not initially seem much concerned with the events that took place in Tivoli in 1944. There is no explicit mention of war; no bombs are dropped, nor is the courtyard turned to partial ruin. And yet the imagery of war subtends much of the language in these stanzas. The Villa’s past appears in small hints and touches so as to become an undercurrent of feeling rather than the poem’s ostensible subject matter:

Tomorrow, before dawn,
Gardeners will come to resurrect
Downtrodden iris, dispose of broken glass,
Return the diamond earrings to the villa, but
As for the moss upon the statue’s shoulder; not
To defeat its green invasion, but to pass

Over the liberal effect
 Caprice and cunning spawn.

In its plainest sense, this stanza describes the grounds of the Villa d'Este following an especially riotous party the night before. Gardeners are cleaning up the grounds and putting everything back in place, while allowing nature room to express itself in overgrowths of moss. That said, the language in which this scene is couched evokes a far more sinister kind of devastation. Consider, by way of example, the words “defeat” and “invasion” in the sixth line: terms of warfare rather than party fare. “Resurrect” in line 2: a term more often used for human life than plant life – a terrible allusion to what is no longer possible for the many war dead in Italy. “Dispose of” in line 3: a term that, in the context of the stanza as a whole, also calls to mind more tragic entities than “broken glass.” One need only remember the bodies that were disposed of in the mass grave at the end of the terrace.

In pointing to specific word choices of this sort, I do not mean to suggest that the description is “actually” a war scene, or that Hecht has built this stanza around coded references that, once unlocked, will reveal the poem to be “actually” about the aerial attack of 1944. Rather, I would like to argue that by evoking these very real occurrences, Hecht was able to enrich his account of the pressures that the artist must reckon with in his work. Beyond chance and human impulse (as represented by the disarray left over from the previous night’s celebrations), the artist must also contend with the pressures of history – both of his own contemporary moment and of the past he has inherited. In this instance, it is the memory of World War II that weighs down on the poet, and that the poet must, in turn, confront.

Moreover, Hecht evidently wants us to see the parallels between these pressures: how, for example, the Dionysian urges of the night reveler may not be wholly separate from the destructive impulse of the soldier. Or, more abstractly, how nature and history are both forces beyond individual control that are nonetheless affected by – indeed propelled by – individual action. For example, the gardener may have limited control over nature as a whole, but he does have a part to play in shaping various segments of nature. And though war may extend beyond the control of individ-

ual fighters, each soldier does have an impact on the direction that conflict will ultimately take. Crucially, Hecht does not oversimplify these different pressures by claiming that one is a mere metaphor for the other. I do not think we are ever made to feel that nature, for instance, is simply a stand-in for history. Instead we are made to understand them as interconnected forces the artist must contend with.

But how does Hecht believe the poet should go about responding to these pressures concretely? What would such a response look and sound like? The poem comes closest to answering these questions in an earlier stanza (the pronoun “it” in the first line refers to the garden):

Actually, it is real
 The way the world is real: the horse
 Must turn against the wind, and the deer feed
 Against the wind, and finally the garden must allow
 For the recalcitrant; a style can teach us how
 To know the world in little where the weed
 Has license, where by dint of force
 D’Estes have set their seal.

The crux of this stanza, I believe, lies in the ambiguity of the verb “allow for,” meaning both “to enable or facilitate,” and “to concede the existence of.” The garden must “allow / For the recalcitrant” in the sense that a work of art must acknowledge the reality of those forces which oppose it: the dropped bomb, the inclement weather, the brunt of human violence. In other words, art must not turn away from such outside pressures, but instead admit fully to their existence. The responsible artist can achieve this goal by “allow[ing] / For the recalcitrant” in the other sense: that is, by representing such forces and enabling them in the work of art itself. If Hecht holds the Villa d’Este in such high regard, it is because the garden succeeds on just these terms. The statues (locked in straining postures around the Villa’s grounds) and the waterworks display (designed and controlled up to a point but obviously less acquiescent than stone) fully reflect the pressures that weigh down on the Villa from without.

Hecht argues for the necessity of art by revealing how we are confronted with these very pressures as individuals in the world.

At the beginning of the stanza, he writes that the horse, too, “turn[s] against the wind”; the deer, too, “feed[s] / Against the wind.” By which we are made to understand that the creatures of the world, too, must strain against the forces of nature, contingency, and history. The work of art should credit that fact by being “real / The way the world is real” – by reproducing these tensions and giving them shape in stone or stanza. Here, Hecht believes, lies the didactic potential of art. In lines 5 and 6, he tells us “a style can teach us how / To know the world.” A poem, or garden, that adequately reflects the pressures of the world will help us recognize how those forces operate in our own lives.

There is one caveat I would like to mention at this juncture. It seems important that Hecht does not claim the artist can ever hope to countermand the pressures of the world entirely. Notice the careful selection of metaphors in the last three lines of this stanza: “where the weed / Has license, where by dint of force / D’Estes have set their seal.” One could very well imagine a different pairing, in which the image of the weed’s license was answered by that weed getting eradicated by the hand of the d’Estes – the forces of nature (or history) overtaken, indeed even destroyed, by the power of art. Instead, Hecht follows up that first image with the d’Estes’ family seal: something juxtaposed or put on, but not something that will cancel out the weed entirely. What’s more, the syntax of these lines insists on the weed and the seal as parallels rather than mutually destructive forces. I’m thinking in particular of the double *where*: “*where* the weed / Has license, *where* by dint of force / D’Estes have set their seal.” Two things set side by side. The modesty of Hecht’s claim for the artist is not a cop-out so much as a responsible admission of art’s limits. A poem will not – cannot – keep the bombs from falling. It can, however, make us better equipped to understand where we stand amid such forces.

In writing about Hecht’s poem so, I do not mean to propose “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este” as a model for the way all formalist poems of the late 1940s and 1950s apprehend their context. Instead I would like to offer it as an example of the many ways poetry in this period has responded to the demands of history without making history its ostensible subject matter. As attentive as literary criticism has been to issues of context, it is still often

assumed that a poem can claim a historical interest only if it displays that interest as subject matter. But “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este,” which is deeply and actively interested in history, is also not really *about* World War II, or at least not in the way we tend to use that word. Wilfred Owen, for example, is often said to write about history because he describes the events of World War I and the people who participated in those events. What Hecht is up to seems very different.

We could put it this way: while Hecht does not really talk *about* the war or take a position *on* the war, he does try to understand his place *within* it. His poem is an attempt to articulate his relation to the pressures of history as both an individual and an artist. He achieves this, importantly, by registering the texture of his own historical moment. Consider again the stanza about the “green invasion” and the “resurrection” of flowers. Passages such as these present history not as discreet events or actors but as a ubiquitous force, the aura in which our individual and communal lives, and our works of art, must play themselves out. Hecht’s thinking on this subject is therefore anything but self-contained. He sees himself as part of a context, and thinks deeply about that position while giving it shape through poetic forms.

Some might object that the poem does in fact retreat from history by making the war’s effects on Tivoli implicit rather than explicit. But this seems to me an artificial contrast – as though a writer could only be said to draw our attention to a given subject by treating it discursively. Instead, the partial omission of context in “The Gardens of the Villa d’Este” (which is only partial – as we have seen, the war does ghost the vocabulary) serves a specific purpose. It mirrors the way in which history, because it is ubiquitous, saturates our everyday activities in ways we instinctively feel even if we have difficulty pointing to them. The bombs do not have to be dropping for history to happen and weigh down on us. What Hecht’s poem tries to do, as a result, is make these pressures audible to us while being truthful to their texture – to the place they occupy in our day-to-day existence.