

“ B U T A T L A S T , T O D A Y , / I
R E M E M B E R E D T H A T H I L L ”

T H E I M P E R A T I V E S O F M E M O R Y I N A N T H O N Y H E C H T



G E O F F R E Y L I N D S A Y

Again, I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time.

— Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

Anthony Hecht’s last volume of poetry, *The Darkness and the Light* (2001), contains a piece titled “Memory” that begins, “Sepia oval portraits of the family, / Black-framed, adorned the small brown-papered hall, / But the parlor was kept unused, never disturbed.” The poem describes an old-fashioned room with “dried hydrangeas . . . the hue of ancient newspaper,” “matching sea-shells,” a “large elephant-foot umbrella stand,” and a teak table complete with Bible and magnifying glass. “Memory” ends with the only movement in the poem, apart from the careful observer’s eye:

Green velvet drapes kept the room dark and airless
Until on sunny days toward midsummer
The brass andirons caught a shaft of light
For twenty minutes in late afternoon

In a radiance dimly akin to happiness –
The dusty gleam of temporary wealth.

Readers encountering the poem where it first appeared in the *Southwest Review* and who were unfamiliar with the body of Hecht's work would be forgiven if they considered it to be not just the description of a memory but a metaphor for the way memory itself typically functions, given that the title is "Memory," not "A Memory." The metaphor may be especially applicable to the very elderly, whose collection of memories is as time bound, color faded, and dated as the items in the room, but whose fond and occasional vivid recollections may indeed provoke, for them, "a radiance dimly akin to happiness – / The dusty gleam of temporary wealth."

But for Hecht, memory has rarely been so benign or so predictable, at least as it has been expressed in his poetry. Take "A Hill," for instance, the celebrated poem that opens *The Hard Hours*, Hecht's Pulitzer prize-winning volume. It begins with the speaker in a sunlit piazza in Rome. Suddenly the colors and noise of the market around him disappear and a "vision" – a particularly vivid memory – of a bleak landscape replaces it, centrally defined by a hill, cold, bare, and desolate. The vision fades, but not before the speaker is shaken, "scared by the plain bitterness" of what he has seen. Ten years later the memory resurfaces, dredged up from some subconscious realm: "but at last, today, / I remembered that hill," the speaker says, and he realizes that the hill was one he stood before for hours in winter as a child. The question of why the unnerving experience would occur in Rome and then resurface ten years later moves us deep into the mystery of memory itself and its imperatives in Hecht's life and poetry. For Hecht, as depicted in "A Hill," recollection is often painful and is sometimes traumatic, but it is also an imperative, a driving force in the process of poetic creation that impels him to reexamine experience – both autobiographical and fictional – in ways that lead him to insight. Memory, both voluntary and involuntary, becomes a device to explore and sometimes to reshape the past and thus to inform and create the present as Hecht fashions the narrative selves of both speaker and poet.

In studying the imperatives of memory, I will consider poems of

an autobiographical cast and those that are more clearly imagined, though the line between the two might be blurred. Jonathan F. S. Post observes in the introduction to the *Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht* (2013) that Hecht's poems "often assume, through a variety of literary devices, a measured distance between speaker and author." Yet the more we learn about the poet, the better we understand the poems' provenience: the effect of Hecht's letters, Post continues, is to give readers "a keen sense of how deeply circumstanced Hecht's poetry is." Hecht's book-length interview with Philip Hoy (1999) also served to shrink that measured distance, and the forthcoming biography by David Yezzi will reduce it further.

The study of memory has been a rich field in the past thirty years, and I will be drawing on relatively recent discussions in the points I wish to make. There are three main issues to consider about autobiographical memory in light of Hecht's recollections in "A Hill" and in other poems where memory is invoked. First, it has been found that later knowledge may affect an earlier memory, so much so that the later knowledge cannot be disentangled from the earlier memory. Second, although we are not always aware of it, memory is often structured to reflect, in articulation, known patterns of narrative (tragedy, comedy, romance, irony) and is therefore subject to modification through this imposition. Third, though it would appear that memory is a reaching back to the past and the traffic is one way, memory's most typical purpose is to have an effect on the present.

In *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, Nicola King outlines two contrasting models of memory that can be found in Freud and elsewhere:

One model, illustrated by Freud by means of an analogy with archaeological excavation, assumes that the past still exists "somewhere," waiting to be rediscovered by the remembering subject, uncontaminated by subsequent experience and time's attrition. The other imagines the process of memory as one of continuous revision or "retranslation," reworking memory-traces in the light of later knowledge and experience.

In the first model, memory encodes, stores, and retrieves events and impressions that had happened to an individual, and these

events, while less or more vivid in recollection, are “true” in the sense that they are imprinted as recorded and are just waiting to be retrieved by the individual remembering. Freud was primarily interested in the repressed but preserved memories that could be recovered through psychoanalysis, memories that were largely unavailable to the conscious mind. However, in daily living we implicitly ascribe to this model of memory, where the encoded and stored past can be recalled more or less as it happened through an effort of will; the narrative of our daily lives, our autobiographies, and the functioning of our law courts and much else largely depend on it, even as we acknowledge its deficiencies. The second model, variations of which are largely accepted by contemporary memory researchers, suggests that uncontaminated memory is a rare thing, that most memory contains traces of the history of the individual that has inserted itself between the occasion and the remembering of the occasion. King gives a vivid example of the second model of memory in an anecdote about Leon Greenman, a British Jew who recounted his terrible experience in Auschwitz. As he chronicled his personal history, including the loss of his wife, his narrative was punctuated with the repeated statement that he “didn’t know that then.” What King notes is that Greenman’s “memory has been forced to assimilate later knowledge which now also belongs to the wider realm of ‘history’: what he can never recover is the ‘innocence’ of the time when he ‘didn’t know.’” Other studies suggest the degree to which a memory is “retranslated” or “retranscribed” in later articulation may depend on the uniqueness and impact of the experience and the degree of change (and, potentially, trauma) between the time of comparative innocence and that of experience.

Hecht’s autobiographical “Apprehensions” can be used to explore these models of memory. The poem is about a child’s loss of innocence not fully understood at the time. It begins as follows:

A grave and secret malady of my brother’s,
 The stock exchange, various grown-up shames,
 The white emergency of hospitals,
 Inquiries from the press, such *coups de théâtre*
 Upon a stage from which I was excluded
 Under the rubric of “benign neglect”

Had left me pretty much to my own devices
 (My own stage was about seven years old)
 Except for a Teutonic governess
 Replete with the curious thumb-print of her race,
 That special relish for inflicted pain.
 Some of this she could vaguely satisfy
 In the pages of the *Journal-American*
 Which featured stories with lurid photographs –
 A child chained tightly to a radiator
 In an abandoned house; the instruments
 With which some man tortured his fiancée,
 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.

The loss of innocence is in part provoked by the Hecht family's financial reversals in the 1929 stock market crash and the subsequent attempted suicide by Hecht's father. In addition, Hecht's brother Roger suffered from a congenital weakness in one arm, problems with his vision, and epilepsy, all of which doctors attempted, without success, to cure or mitigate. In recalling his childhood, the speaker remembers a household in turmoil, the cause of which the seven-year-old cannot fathom: "All the elisions / Cried loudly in a tongue I didn't know." In interviews, Hecht relates that his childhood was unhappy, that his parents were unloving and even pettily spiteful, and that they were unsupportive, considering him good for nothing. At one point his parents told him that the very expensive aptitude tests they had him undertake indicated that Hecht "had no aptitudes whatever." When Hecht developed an enthusiasm for music, he told J. D. McClatchy, his mother "lost all interest in music, and quit playing"; when he and his brother started to write poetry, she "stopped reading poetry abruptly, and firmly declared she 'couldn't understand' anything written by either of [them]." The tone of some of his poems, he states, "is the matured and mellowed residue of what in childhood had been a poisonous brew of fear, hatred, self-loathing, impotence, and deep discouragement." Ironically, given the poem's story of a fall into experience, the young speaker's only

solace is a Christmas gift of “The Book of Knowledge, complete in twenty volumes,” which became his refuge. The poem seems a straightforward recollection of a memory stored and retrieved.

The correspondence published in *Selected Letters* and material in the Hecht archive at Emory University complicate this narrative. From an early age Hecht wrote notes and letters to his parents, who obviously kept and perhaps cherished them; there is little indication of a troubled childhood or of a troubled household. (That Hecht himself later kept them and other correspondence of his parents when they came into his possession is perhaps interesting too.) Hecht was both a dutiful and an enthusiastic correspondent: he wrote his parents detailed letters in adolescence, during his years at college, throughout his time in Europe and Occupied Japan during the war, and until his early thirties while living and traveling in Europe. (His adult letters to his parents are often addressed “Dear Kids” or “Dear Folks.”) As a child, his letters are full of his exploits at summer camp – fishing, wrestling with his friends, playing pranks on counselors, participating in theatrical and musical performances, and the like. He signs his letters as a typical child would, “Love, Tony,” or “Lots of love,” and sometimes signs off with an affectionate dig at the family cook: “Tell Paula she’s a nut.” For the few letters where we may, knowing the family history detailed in “Apprehensions” and interviews, read with heightened sensitivity (“[I] love you more than you love me”), there are many more where strong, apparently unconcerned affection is evident: “I miss you so much it hurts. Ouch!!!”; “Love from your best pal”; “I miss you all very much and will be glad to get home.” When, in his early twenties, Hecht brought acquaintances home for visits, these young men were struck by the hospitality shown by his parents, as the visitors’ effusive thank-you letters in the Hecht archive demonstrate. One young man, Jim Ryan, even kept in touch with Hecht’s parents during the war, sending them short notes to update them about their son and thanking them for the letters and care packages the Hechts sent to him.

We can only speculate about whether later disagreements with his parents colored Hecht’s memory of his childhood, in effect, “retranslating” those memories into something with a darker shading than is evident by the documentary evidence of the letters in the Hecht archive at Emory. Certainly family disagreements

begin to creep into the surviving correspondence by the time Hecht is in his mid-twenties. Post writes that “Hecht could also sharply address, or redress, his parents on old family subjects – his mother’s meddling in his personal life, for instance.” But it may be also that events subsequent to his childhood led to a greater understanding of family dynamics, leading to a retranscription of those earlier memories. When Hecht was in Rome in 1952, he told Philip Hoy (although he misremembers the date as 1950), his mother arrived to tell him that she was divorcing his father and as a result his father would lose his job and would “probably commit suicide.” As it turned out, his parents stayed together, but the episode does portray a family in crisis, and it certainly would have been unnerving for Hecht to hear his mother speak that way. An observation by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* quoted by Nicola King is pertinent here: “Experiences, impressions and memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh circumstances or to fit in with a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness. . . . It is not lived experience in general which undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context.” The conditions described by Laplanche and Pontalis are similar to those the narrator of “The Venetian Vespers” experiences after he discovers that his uncle deliberately left the speaker’s father to languish in a mental institution and, in all likelihood, bedded the speaker’s mother. Before learning of his uncle’s betrayal, the speaker says, “I . . . though I had lost my parents, / Thought I was happy almost throughout my youth. / Innocent, like Othello in his First Act. / *‘I saw’t not, thought it not, it harmed not me.’*” Later, though, the speaker’s memory of his childhood is reconfigured, as he incorporates what he “didn’t know” then about his family situation. His uncle, he says, took on

the unpaid task

Of raising me, making himself my parent,
 Forbearing and encouraging and kind.
 Or so it seemed. Often in my nightmares
 Since then I appear craven and repulsive,
 Always soliciting his good opinion.

Speculation about Hecht's relationship with his parents aside, what we can say with certainty is that the seven-year-old Hecht of "Apprehensions" could not have described his German governess as possessing "the curious thumb-print of her race, / That special relish for inflicted pain." Only after his experience in World War II, and only after his working as a translator at the concentration-work camp of Flossenbürg, where he learned of the tremendous suffering inflicted on the inmates by the camp guards, could he make that claim. Hecht has stated of Flossenbürg that "the place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking." The seven-year-old Hecht "didn't know that then," but the narrator of "Apprehensions" does.

There is one further aspect to Hecht's memory of Flossenbürg that has a bearing on "Apprehensions" and other poems. Hecht told Philip Hoy that when he and his company arrived for guard duty, part of the horror was that "Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus." Contemporary accounts of Flossenbürg, however, indicate that there were between 1,500 and 2,000 prisoners left in the camp by the time the liberators arrived. The rest, some 15,000, had been force-marched out of the camp in anticipation of the arrival of the Allies. Many perished on the road away from Flossenbürg, but not in the camp itself. An "Action Report" document – an unofficial diary of Hecht's C Company written by one of his fellow infantrymen – contains this entry, in part, for 29 April 1945: "Eight hundred of the sixteen hundred political prisoners in the concentration camp were sick from typhus. When the first outfit arrived, men were found dying at the rate of 80 per day. When we arrived the Medical Corps and the camp's hospital had cut this death rate down to 30 per day." The September 1945 issue of *The National Jewish Monthly*, reporting on Flossenbürg, put the number of survivors at 2,000. It also reported that 800 prisoners were shot just before the camp's liberation and their bodies buried in shallow graves. German civilians were instructed by the Allies to recover the bodies, to view them for thirty minutes while standing at attention, then to bury them properly. The article concludes, "Neither the Germans who experienced these sights nor the occupation troops will soon forget them."

The magnitude of the horror and its effect on Hecht is reflected in the way the seventy-five-year-old poet, writing to Philip Hoy,

remembers the experience. A tenfold increase in the number of dead is not an exaggeration – it is the way Hecht recalls that traumatic experience, so affected has he been by it. Granted, Hecht has admitted that his memory of the experience might be faulty; to Hoy, he says, “I must add an important point: after the war I read widely in Holocaust literature, and I can no longer separate my anger and revulsion at what I really saw from what I later came to learn.” Memory and history are mingled until memory is retranslated. Similarly, the writer of “Apprehensions” cannot separate the anger and revulsion he feels toward his “Teutonic governess” with the “curious thumb-print of her race” from a seven-year-old’s dislike of a strict and even cruel guardian. Far too much history has intervened between the memory and the recreation of the memory in verse for that. Indeed, at the end of the poem, Hecht acknowledges just how much that reconfigured past has carried forward to inform and continue to create the person he has become, one with the imperative to witness and record:

Just when it was that Fräulein disappeared
I don’t recall. We continued to meet each other
By secret assignations in my dreams
In which, by stages, our relationship
Grew into international proportions
As the ghettos of Europe emptied, the box cars
Rolled toward enclosures terminal and obscene,
The ovens blazed away like Pittsburgh steel mills,
Chain-smoking through the night.

The second aspect of memory that Hecht’s poems invite thinking about is the way his and his speakers’ identities are constructed through narrative. Again, Nicola King is helpful here:

It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives. However, it is not only the *content* of memories, experiences and stories which construct a sense of identity: the concept of the self which is constructed in these narratives is also dependent upon assumptions about the function and process of memory and the kind of access it gives us to the past. Hayden White (1973)

has analysed how historical narratives tend to be organised according to one of the tropes of tragedy, comedy, romance or irony, and clearly the subject may construct a narrative – or a series of mini-narratives – of his or her life in the mode of any one of these at any time, not to mention the conscious and unconscious embroiderings and elaborations which make these stories more interesting.

We will come back to Hecht's autobiographical poems in a moment, but I'd like to turn to Hecht's longer works, specifically his dramatic monologues, as they, by their very form, require that the speakers' identity be constructed through narrative. Moreover, the situation of the speaker in a typical Hecht dramatic monologue is that of an individual remembering back and trying to come to terms with what has led to the present moment of insight. The self-described failure of "The Venetian Vespers" recalls his childhood, the husband of "See Naples and Die" reconstructs what led to the end of his marriage, and the dying woman in "The Transparent Man" uses a memory from her youth to help explain her acceptance of her lot. Although any one of these would serve as a model for the narrative construction of identity, I'd like to look more closely at "See Naples and Die," which has had less critical attention paid to it than has "The Venetian Vespers."

Like that earlier dramatic monologue, "See Naples and Die" is deliberately constructed so that readers will recognize a literary or archetypal situation as part of its scaffolding. Where in "The Venetian Vespers" that scaffolding concerns marital betrayal by a brother (*Hamlet* is a "ghostly paradigm" behind the poem, Hecht told McClatchy), in "See Naples and Die" it is the biblical fall. In this initial sense, then, the mode the memory is organized by in the poem is tragedy. But there is a healthy dose of irony in the poem as well, especially in the Jamesian obtuseness of the narrator and in the rendition of elements of the fall and subsequent playing out of the Christian narrative that follows this transgression – expulsion, sacrifice, death, and resurrection. Hecht made the connection plain in a draft of a letter to Joseph Brodsky:

My poem is intended as a *commentary* on the events in *Genesis*: the temptation, the fall, and the expulsion. It is also a commentary on the epigraph from Simone Weil. It is

mainly, however, an account of the visions of paradise and of damnation that are glimpsed in the course of mundane affairs. Its speaker is one of the damned; and one who fails to understand what has happened to him. He reveals more than he understands himself, like some of the characters in Henry James or Ford Madox Ford. He is figuratively “blind,” and there is irony in his pride in being a careful observer, especially when he gets cheated during the “temptation” scene.

The poem begins with the narrator attempting to recall the circumstances that led to the end of his marriage, and it is couched in terms that suggest the experience was traumatic. As in “A Hill,” the speaker will revisit the past “at last” in an attempt at closure:

I can at last consider those events
 Almost without emotion, a circumstance
 That for many years I'd scarcely have believed.
 We forget much, of course, and, along with facts,
 Our strong emotions, of pleasure and of pain,
 Fade into stark insensibility.
 For which, perhaps, it need be said, thank God.
 So I can read from my journal of that time
 As if it were written by a total stranger.

The character of the speaker emerges as the poem develops. He is probably English (he takes “tea” in the afternoon), multilingual, well educated and well read, appreciative of the art, sculpture, and landscape Naples offers, and given to simile- and metaphor-heavy descriptions of his surroundings that tend to the painterly or the affected, such as when he describes a table “where carafes / Of citrine wine glow with unstable gems, / Prison the sun like genie in their holds, / Enshrine their luminous spirits.” He prides himself on “being a keen observer,” which accounts for the elaborate descriptions, yet he is also an unreliable narrator and is largely unaware of the feelings of his increasingly estranged wife or even of his own. In remembering or, rather, in reconstructing events from the past he reveals an unstableness to his memories, a sense that he “didn’t know that then” while he was writing his journal, and so the speaker is reevaluating and even retranscribing what he remembers as a consequence. He says, for instance, of his wife, “I

look at her with love (was it with love?)” and a little later states that everything he saw “Bespoke an unassailable happiness. / And so it was. Or so I thought it was.” The later unraveling of their relationship colors his memories, and he almost unconsciously restructures these memories into a pattern of tragedy that reflects the couple’s eventual estrangement.

A quick summary of the poem’s plot is useful here. The speaker and his wife, Martha, are on a vacation in beautiful Naples and everything is fine, in the prelapsarian time of their marriage. (In an early draft of the poem, this was their honeymoon.) The temptation in this garden is almost trifling – the narrator, guided by the “anxious pride of every tourist,” attempts to exchange some money on the black market and is conned out of his travelers’ checks. This event leads to a kind of expulsion from their “garden,” as in quick order are episodes where the couple witness the funeral of a small child (death has entered their world) and an excursion of “freaks and mutants / From a local hospital,” after which, when he tries to console his wife about the “all-too-sad calamities of others,” the narrator’s complacent solicitude serves only to reveal the core insensitivity his wife had not discovered in him before (a kind of nakedness): “At this she raised her arm, shielding her eyes / As if she thought I were about to strike her . . . / And then she gave me / A look the like of which I can’t describe.” The sacrifice and resurrection that follow are a grotesque parody of the Christian narrative in that a dog is forced to inhale the fumes rising from within the Grotta del Cane, whereupon it goes into wild convulsions, “falls limp with every semblance of / Death,” and once removed to the mouth of the cave, presently twitches, drools, and staggers to its feet, the latest of a daily histrionic resurrection. The kingdom of heaven, attainable because of such sacrifice, is the “Elysian Fields” the narrator is taken to subsequently that turns out to be

a vacant wilderness of weeds,
 Thistles and mulberries, with here and there
 Poplars, quite shadeless; thick, ramshackle patches
 Of thorny amaranth, tousled by vines.
 This wild, ungoverned growth, this worthless, thick,
 And unsuppressible fecundity
 Was dotted with a scattering of graves

Of the most modest sort: worn, simple stones
 From which all carving had been long effaced,
 And under which the mute, anonymous dead
 Slept in supreme indifference to the green
 Havoc about them, the discourse of guides,
 The bewildered tourists, acres of desolation.

Readers who follow Hecht's career have seen this landscape before: it is the desolate vision of "A Hill," the "endless umber landscape" of "Peripeteia," the "wilds / Of loneliness" of "Auspices," and others. About such landscapes Hecht told McClatchy that he had "always felt that desolation, that hell itself, is most powerfully expressed in an uninhabited natural landscape at its bleakest." What has been less clear in these other poems, however, is how one arrives at such a vision (and Hecht uses the word again toward the conclusion of "See Naples and Die").

I've suggested earlier that the speaker has a tendency to reach for simile and metaphor as a means of describing and understanding his world. This tendency is a habit of mind that is deeply ingrained, reflexive of a sensibility attuned to the literary and artistic life (as is Martha's). Hecht's speakers (dramatic and lyric) are sometimes blessed (or cursed) with an expansive, florid vocabulary; it is part of their refined, painterly response to what they observe. In "See Naples and Die," the light is "fritillary," their coffee has "froth-white cowls," the beggars are "mendicants," a carriage is "beplumed," the bay is "snake-skinned" (note the allusion), a visit to the countryside is an "apolaustic interval." No less important in defining the speaker's character is the sense that what he perceives is filtered through some literary and aesthetic light, through what he has read and studied, rather than what he has experienced. A fish in a restaurant is "Like a Picasso lady with both eyes / On one side of her face," the young man who cons him out of his money is a "*bella figura*" "like other Neapolitan sinners" he has been reading about in a guide book quoting a "seventeenth-century diarist," a gloomy day is "like those steel engravings / Of the *Inferno* by Gustave Doré," the thalidomide victims he encounters "seem like raw material from the painting / Of Bosch's *Temptation of St. Anthony*," and haggling with a guide for payment is "A routine out of *commedia dell'arte*." His imagination is literary: when Martha disappears suddenly (shaken by the sight of the

thalidomide victims), the speaker's reaction tends to the melodramatic: "It suddenly seemed that she might be the victim / Of some barbaric or unthinkable crime: / That, kidnapped, she was being held for ransom, / Or worse."

Central to our understanding of what happens to the speaker is the lengthy description of a painting in the Museo Nazionale (it takes up 49 lines of a 488-line poem). The painting is Giovanni Bellini's *The Transfiguration*, the moment when Jesus reveals himself to three apostles as divine, and the hidden truth of his nature is made manifest. Jesus becomes radiant, transformed in his glory, and the apostles are dazzled by the sight and the sudden certainty of an afterlife as God the Father speaks, and the spirits of the prophets Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus. It is a key moment in the life of Jesus and in the history of Christianity as the "human" Jesus is revealed as the supernatural son of God. For Christians, perhaps only the resurrection is more significant evidence of that fact.

It is curious that the speaker of "See Naples and Die," for all his education in the arts, gets some of the painting's details wrong; but again, this might be evidence of an unreliable memory. He says that the picture depicts "five dazzled apostles," yet the biblical account clearly states that three apostles and the prophets Moses and Elijah were present. The speaker describes the significance of what is taking place:

Their lowered eyes indicate that, unseeing,
They have seen everything, have understood
The entire course of human history,
The meaning and the burden of the lives
Of Samson, Jonah, and Melchizedek,
Isaiah's and Zechariah's prophecies,
The ordinance of destiny, the flow
And tide of providential purposes.
All hope, all life, all effort has assembled
And taken human shape in the one figure
There in the midst of them this afternoon.

What follows immediately after the speaker and Martha leave the museum is a series of transfigurations of their own in which the world is revealed, not as numinous and providential, not as glori-

ous and free from pain, but bleak, deformed, warped, and crippled. Nero's baths, talked up by their guide, are "desultory ruins . . . / Littered by tourists, and excrement of dogs," the Elysian Fields are overgrown scrub, everything is turned to ash: "What sticks in the mind, what I cannot escape, / Is the setting in which we found ourselves that day / I first began to see us as outcast: / The ugliness of the landscape, the conviction / That no painter would think it worth a glance."

The poem's epigraph is from Simone Weil: "It is better to say, 'I'm suffering,' than to say, 'This landscape is ugly.'" In the letter to Brodsky, Hecht states that the poem is, in part, a commentary on this observation, and we may add to it another statement by Weil from the same page in *Gravity and Grace*: "I can taint the whole universe with my wretchedness without feeling it or collecting it together within myself." The speaker *has* tainted his whole universe, not without not feeling it necessarily, but without understanding just what has caused him to feel "outcast," to say the landscape is ugly rather than "I'm suffering." Perhaps the sentence that comes just before the observation that Hecht used as the epigraph provides an explanation. Weil writes, "We have to endure the discordance between imagination and fact." It is that discordance the speaker finds so difficult to accept.

The role of memory in the poem is to create out of disparate episodes the narrative that led to the breakup of the marriage. As David Lowenthal, in *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, observes of memory generally, it "transforms the experienced past into what we later think it should have been, eliminating undesired scenes and making favoured ones suitable." Again we can turn to the painting at the center of the poem to perceive what Hecht wants readers to understand. The misprision of the speaker about the audience before Jesus points to the key; the speaker misidentifies two apostles that should be two prophets. Prophecy is at the heart of the painting and the transfiguration itself: the men standing beside Jesus "have understood / The entire course of human history," they have understood the meaning and the burden of lives, "The ordinance of destiny, the flow / And tide of providential purposes." It is this, more than an explanation for "all human misery and suffering" that the speaker perceives in the painting but not in his own life: a sense of order and an order that makes

sense. His remembering back is his way of trying to understand the meaning and the burden of his own life. And the only way he can do so is to inject what he “didn’t know” then into the narrative that creates his former and present self:

It seems to me in fact that Martha and I
 Were somehow victims of a nameless blight
 And dark interior illness. We were both
 Decent and well-intentioned, capable
 Of love and devotion and all the rest of it,
 Had it not been for what in other ages
 Might have been thought of as the wrath of God,
 The cold, envenoming spirit of Despair,
 Turning what was the nectar of the world
 To ashes in our mouths. We were the cursed
 To whom it seemed no joy was possible,
 The spiritually warped and handicapped.
 It seems, in retrospect, as I look over
 The pages of this journal, that the moments
 Of what had once seemed love were an illusion,
 The agreement, upon instinct, of two people
 Grandly to overestimate each other,
 An accord essentially self-flattering,
 The paradise of fools before the fall.

To the reader, this conclusion is unsatisfying as an explanation of what has occurred in the poem and in the relationship between the two, as it seems an abdication of personal agency and responsibility. But it is wholly in keeping with the speaker’s limited perspective. In essence, he has substituted – transfigured – one ordinance of destiny for another, one glorious providential purpose for a darker one. The concept of self that has been constructed here is organized according to the trope of tragedy in which the “nameless blight” is the tragic protagonist’s undeserved misfortune and the episodes thus remembered conform to this pattern. Jerome Bruner in “The Narrative Construction of Reality” refers to the modes by which we tell our narratives and the effect that each has, both on the teller and on the listener:

While genres . . . may indeed be loose but conventional ways of representing human plights, they are also ways of telling

that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways. In a word, while they may be representations of social ontology, they are also invitations to a particular style of epistemology. As such, they may have quite as powerful an influence in shaping our modes of thought as they have in creating the realities that their plots depict.

When the narrator looks over his journal, he believes that “the moments / Of what had once seemed love were an illusion.” To the speaker, this seems a revelation, a lifting of the fog of innocence and ignorance, an acceptance of the discordance between imagination and fact. But to the sensitive reader, the section quoted above is yet another reconfiguration of the speaker’s literary imagination, this time under the influence of the controlling trope: the capitalized “Despair” and his depression are artfully described as “what in other ages / Might have been thought of as the wrath of God,” recalling an earlier tradition of Christian despair; the nectar-to-ashes trope echoes, among others, book 10 of *Paradise Lost*; and the section ends with a self-conscious allusion to the fall. Hecht has a comment on the speaker of “Green: An Epistle” that is relevant here: “Nearly everyone has some capacity for self-exoneration, and for viewing the past in a highly selective and self-protective way. Certain kinds of people like to see their defeats and miseries as heaven-sent mortifications of their pride, yet Freud has told us that such mortifications and repressions can be deforming, and we prefer to think of ourselves as noble rather than deformed.” The speaker here is noble *and* deformed, in that there is an implied nobility in his resignation and suffering. The poem ends with the speaker at the site where Pliny the Elder witnessed the eruption of Vesuvius in the year 79, the description of the unpreventable natural disaster a metaphor for the narrator’s disintegrating marriage. The speaker identifies with the doomed Pliny, who remained and catalogued with “scientific curiosity” the “naked horrors” in front of him even as it cost him his life.

“See Naples and Die” is not autobiographical: Hecht’s first marriage came apart in a different Italian city, Rome, and three years before thalidomide was introduced. He also draws on research, not memory, for some of the poem’s details, including using a 1784 entry in *Miss Berry’s Journals and Correspondence*, from which

Hecht borrowed some details about the dog's death and revival, and the *Diary of John Evelyn*, written in 1645, which provided the description of the cutting of the warm turf. But there are interesting parallels between the poem and Hecht's experience, and these suggest that the poem is "deeply circumstanced," to use Post's term.

To back up a little, Hecht spent time in Europe and in particular Italy in 1949, 1950, 1951, and 1952. He met Auden, who was living in Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples, in 1951, and that same year Hecht was the surprise winner of the inaugural Rome Fellowship in Literature, given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He spent a year based in Rome reading, writing poems, and traveling to Milan, Siena, Vienna, and other places to look at art and to listen to music, and he met scholars, musicians, and painters who would become friends and collaborators. It was a heady time for the twenty-eight-year-old Hecht, and poems written or revised during that year eventually led to the publication of his first book, *A Summoning of Stones*, in March 1954. His 1951–52 letters to his parents and to his brother Roger contain enthusiastic descriptions of the life of a man of letters with the time and money to live as he might have wanted. "Vienna was marvellous," Hecht wrote his parents in early June 1952. "The food, the people, everything. Heard music every night I was there: *Tristan*, *The Magic Flute*, Bach, Hindemith, and the Vienna Choir boys, singing Mass on Sunday morning, and the St. Matthew Passion Monday night."

In February 1954, he married Patricia Harris (called Pat in the *Letters*) and not long after received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which Hecht would use to return to Rome and the American Academy. In a newspaper interview in May of that year, Hecht looked forward to the trip: "I'll be able to do a good deal of writing at my own leisure," he says. "It also comes as the perfect honeymoon for Mrs. Hecht and myself." However, this second fellowship was largely a disaster. The young couple (married for just eight months) were increasingly at odds, and as a result Hecht couldn't concentrate on his work. "The tenure of my Guggenheim is already half gone," he wrote to his parents in autumn 1954, "and I have nothing to show for it; and the contemplation of this alone is enough to make me feel terrible." The people he met at the

academy were not as interesting or as friendly as they were during his previous fellowship. To make matters worse, Pat became pregnant, despite their precautions. The arrival of a child at this point would have been most inopportune, and Hecht worried that the pregnancy would be dangerous to Pat's health. They planned to get an abortion, first in New York and then in Switzerland, when Hecht thought that Pat might not go through with it if she returned to New York and found out he intended to leave her (which was his plan). (The whole matter is a little unseemly as detailed in Hecht's letters.) When Pat had a miscarriage, Hecht was relieved, as was Pat, he wrote. Finally, in June 1955, Pat returned to New York, where she took an apartment, but Hecht was not sure if he would live with her when his fellowship in Rome was over. Even without the distracting presence of his wife, he struggled to be productive while his personal life was in an upheaval: "The work has been going forward with the greatest difficulty," he wrote his parents in November 1955. "I have no feeling about whether what I am writing is good or bad, and the whole business is totally without excitement and pleasure for me." Eventually Hecht did return to Pat, with whom he had two children before their separation in 1959 and divorce in 1961.

Where poem and biography overlap is in the growing sense of disillusionment felt by both speaker and poet. By the end of 1954, Hecht was at his wit's end, and his relationship with Pat would continue to be difficult through 1955. The Rome he had remembered and imagined returning to for a productive sojourn was no longer there; it had withered in the presence of his own Martha. But there is another intriguing relationship between biography and poem that is worth observing. In "See Naples and Die," the friction between the couple, the reason for their estrangement, is never spelled out. But the signs of their incompatibility are framed in terms of empathy and understanding around the issue of children: the two key episodes of estrangement are when they see a child's coffin and when they encounter a group of young thalidomide victims. In both cases, the speaker's attitude is that of an artist's detached attention to form, color, and detail, however grotesque or sad, while Martha reacts with what at first might be maternal, womanly care. But there is a curious section at the end of the child's funeral episode for which there has been no preparation earlier in the poem:

The sidewalk throngs all cross themselves, and Martha
 Seems especially and mysteriously upset
 In ways I fail to understand until
 Back in our room she breaks out angrily:
 "Didn't you see how small the coffin was?"
 I am bewildered by this accusation.
 Of course I *saw*, but thought it far more prudent
 To leave the topic delicately untouched.

There is much that is unstated in these lines, much left unsaid between these two. The poem hints at a larger drama that precedes but pervades the account given. It is curious too that after the episode with the thalidomide children, the speaker is reminded of "a vivid recollection from that morning: / Not of the warped and crippled, but of the reds, / Among the pale profusions of azaleas, / The brilliant reds of the geraniums." In the context of the poem, we are likely to associate this color with an indifferent and amoral nature, "red in tooth and claw." But in the context of the life, we might well be reminded of the anguish over Pat's pregnancy, especially when we know that the author of these lines also wrote "The Vow," published in 1957, but probably written the year before. That poem explores the speaker and his partner's very different response to a miscarriage and begins, "In the third month, a sudden flow of blood." In *Poet's Choice*, Hecht wrote of "The Vow," "Just how much of it is true in that particular [autobiographical] sense I take to be my own private business." He also stated that he owed Robert Lowell "a debt of gratitude" for giving him "the courage to tackle a difficult and unpleasant subject." The word *unpleasant* always struck me as an odd response to a miscarriage, but I attributed it to Hecht's habit of classical restraint. In light of biography, the word carries more freight. That earlier poem reads as a measure of atonement for the unpleasant business associated with Pat's pregnancy in 1954 and Hecht's response. "See Naples and Die," with its oblique criticism of the narrator, is where Hecht can "at last" reconsider the relationship that the imperatives of memory have not let fade.

There is a danger here of assuming too much, of course, and I remain mindful of Hecht's own judicious approach to biography when he writes on Auden, Bishop, Dickinson, Lowell, Frost, and

others. He does not necessarily avoid speculation and the occasional psychological analysis; for instance, when making the case that Frost's neatly stacked wood represents his store of poems in "The Wood-Pile," he writes, "This wood-pile might well signify for Robert Frost the secret fears he must have entertained when, a year earlier, his first book had been greeted by such discouraging reviews." But the focus is squarely on the poetry, and biography serves where it might enlighten or extend our understanding of the work. We do well to avoid being the kind of reader Hecht gently reproves when he writes on the puzzle of Shakespeare's sonnets: "There are always readers who seek, not art, but something documentary and unassailably factual; when these two categories seem mysteriously intermingled, they will always prize the second over the first."

Nonetheless, "See Naples and Die" is useful as a model for what one does with memory, what one uses it for. Whether or not Hecht meant to finally resolve old contestations, the speaker of the poem clearly does. The speaker's retrospection speaks to the third point I wish to make about memory, that although it is a looking back to the past, memory's most typical purpose is to have an effect on the present. In *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal argues that "the prime function of memory . . . is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present." Charles I. Armstrong writes in *Figures of Memory* that engaging with the challenges of remembering "leads us to return to our very understanding of the past in a ceaseless process of reinterpretation and recalibration, which further enables us to face, once more, that which is to come. It is . . . not the least of memory's gifts that it returns us, again and again, to the future." And Paul Hetherington, in "The Past Ahead: Understanding Memory in Contemporary Poetry," discusses how autobiographical memory is used in poetry and concludes with this observation:

What the contemporary lyric frequently gives us are beguiling fictions of memory. These derive their authenticity from their fidelity to the larger truth that memory stories often know us better than we know ourselves, and better than any demonstrably factual material associated with recollection. When we mine memory for what we were, it so often tells us what we are – and also what we are becoming.

To return to “A Hill,” we might ask what Hecht was, and what he was becoming when “at last” and after “about ten years,” he suddenly remembered where he had seen that hill. Mark Strand wrestles with the ending of the poem in this manner in “Views of the Mysterious Hill”:

The problem is what to make of the hill. Why it should appear, and why, having appeared, it should frighten the narrator, and why it should take him ten years finally to place it, are all vexing questions. But most vexing is why would a boy stand before it for hours in wintertime? . . . The hill must have had some magical pull on the boy, something that he felt then, but was reluctant to acknowledge as an adult until it came back to him in Italy like a lost piece of his American past.

For Strand, the hill is, finally, an image of a particularly American Parnassus which, although counterintuitive (as Strand acknowledges), makes sense when we recall from Hecht’s interviews with Hoy and McClatchy that as a young man his decision to become a poet was in part an act of rebellion against his parents. For McClatchy, the image is more sinister. “The action here is the emergence of a suppressed memory,” he explains in “Anatomies of Melancholy,” and he too looks to biography to elucidate a poem that is “charged with private associations.” Memories of Hecht’s World War II experiences, McClatchy argues, “hover over the landscape of ‘A Hill.’”

That it has been “about ten years” since the vision of desolation is general and specific enough to be poetically sound (compare “nine years” or “eight years”) and biographically interesting. The poem was sent to Howard Moss at *The New Yorker* in late 1960, about ten years, as Hecht remembered it, since the unsettling interview with his mother in Rome about his father’s prospects. The poem begins to address, in a first tentative step, the issues he had with his parents and which would be evident in *The Hard Hours* in a poem such as “Behold the Lilies of the Field” (another poem of remembrance, albeit displaced in time), where the “mother” in the poem is criticized as hypocritical and uncaring. As Hecht told Hoy, the question of why a child would be outside for long hours in the dead of winter by himself lends poignancy to the

ending of the poem: “He does not do so willingly; he is compelled to. And he is compelled to because no one comes to take him away from all this barrenness.” It may well be that Hecht had other things on his mind as well, having recently separated from Pat, who took their two children to live with her, leaving Hecht with a different kind of barrenness under compulsion. Ironically, the poem was published in the 29 February 1964 issue of *The New Yorker*, virtually ten years to the day after his marriage to Pat.

The poem depicts two distinct episodes of involuntary autobiographical memory, the first of which is described as a kind of vision, while the second takes place when the speaker remembers where he saw the hill. Involuntary autobiographical memory is memory that arises spontaneously, sometimes triggered by an audible, visible, or olfactory cue, while voluntary memory is memory that is directed and controlled through a conscious process. Involuntary memory has been associated, at least in the public’s mind, with stress and trauma, as sufferers from posttraumatic stress disorder are among those studied clinically and reported on when the involuntary recall of trauma leads to antisocial behavior. But recent studies have demonstrated that involuntary memory is at least as common as voluntary memory in daily life and results in generally positive experiences. That said, traumatic events are likely to be imprinted in memory in such a way that they will be more vivid and more particular in both voluntary and involuntary recall, and while voluntary recall, because deliberately set up and executed, may be controllable by the person recalling, involuntary memory by its very suddenness can have a disproportionate impact on the subject. As Dorthe Berntsen explains in her essay in *Understanding Autobiographical Memory*, “Involuntary memories involve more mood impact and physical reaction at the time of recall than voluntary memories. . . . One possible explanation as to why involuntary memories are more frequently accompanied by an emotional reaction is that their sudden and spontaneous nature allows little time for antecedent emotion regulation.”

Hecht uses involuntary memory elsewhere in his poetry, subtly and unobtrusively in “The Transparent Man” when the narrator recalls the toy that gives the poem its name, and in “Murmur,” where the apprehension of the speaker’s own mortality triggers a memory of a telephone call to another suffering soul. But it is used

most powerfully and effectively in “The Book of Yolek,” where an evening meal at a campsite sets the narrator to recall first, voluntarily, a childhood corn roast and bonfire at a summer camp and then, involuntarily, a very different camp that Hecht had read about where the Jewish child Yolek was sent in 1942. Hecht describes the effect of such a visitation:

Whether on a silent, solitary walk
 Or among crowds, far off or safe at home,
 You will remember, helplessly, that day,
 And the smell of smoke, and the loudspeakers of the camp.
 Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.
 His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.

The sestina form used in this poem, with its six repeated end words, is the perfect vehicle for a poem about an obsessive memory, but it is also effective as an example of how involuntary memory can be evoked by inauspicious triggers – a particular sound, a wisp of smoke – that lie hidden in our everyday lives after such an experience. The six repeated words, while not triggers themselves necessarily, are deftly woven into the poem’s fabric so that they can conjure up a response that is comforting or harrowing, depending on the context: *home*, *camp*, *meal*, in particular, are effective that way.

Berntsen has theorized that the evolutionary purposes of involuntary memory are threefold: “knowledge transfer,” in which “involuntary memories assist knowledge transfer from a past to a present situation”; “selective rehearsal,” whereby certain memories are recalled to contribute to “the development of a structured autobiographical knowledge base”; and “enlarged temporal horizon,” sometimes described as mental time travel, which “enables the individual to plan the future in the light of past experiences.” One may well argue that voluntary memory performs these three functions as well, but as Berntsen notes, “The motivational force . . . is enhanced by the fact that involuntary memories are accompanied by more emotional impact than their voluntary counterparts.” It is, in part, therefore, the involuntary aspect of the memory that gives poems like “The Book of Yolek” and “A Hill” their power and the sense that they look to the present and future as much as they do to the past.

But what future? For “The Book of Yolek” it is a present and future that need reminding that such events must never recur and that the lost voices must be heard: “Mine is the task to find out words / For their memorial sakes,” Hecht writes in “Persistences.” For “A Hill,” as I’ve already suggested (as have others), it is the step toward addressing issues of family, marriage, and his experience in the war, all of which were skirted in his first book and which now, he told William Heyen, had “enormous emotional importance” for him. But the real key for *The Hard Hours* as a successful volume is “A Hill” as its first poem. As has often been noted, the poem sets the tone for the volume, for the pictures of desolation, suffering, and death that fill its pages. “A Hill” was a late choice for a first poem; a draft table of contents in the Hecht archive at Emory lists “The End of the Weekend” as the first poem. Hecht probably realized that that poem, with its juxtaposition of sensuality (the couple is about to have sex) with death (a large predatory bird seizes a rodent), was too much like the poem that opens *A Summoning of Stones*, “Double Sonnet,” which juxtaposes the “grace” of a woman’s sensual movement with the “bone hand / Of gracelessness” that portends their, and every living thing’s, death. But the effectiveness and the enduring power of “A Hill,” I would argue, is in the ability of involuntary memory to jolt both speaker and reader, to lay bare, in a moment, the discordance between imagination and fact. As Tony Webster, the narrator of Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*, asks, “What if, even at a late stage, your emotions relating to those long-ago events and people change?” Some of that change may come about because of what one “didn’t know” then; at other times the impulse derives from the need to reconfigure the past to accommodate the claims of the present. Lacking the biographical details “A Hill” elides, readers may be aware of only a portion of that poem’s momentous change, but the more we understand Hecht’s life, the better we can appreciate the richness of the poems, and how biography and art are “mysteriously intermingled,” to use Hecht’s phrase, in the poems where memory is invoked.