

G R I E F S , N O T
G R I E V A N C E S

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, ANTHONY HECHT,
AND CONTEXTS FOR AN ACT OF TRANSLATION



V I N C E N T K L I N G

I try as a matter of principle to avoid polemical or political poetry. Robert Frost once said, poetry comes from griefs, not grievances. Poetry should not put itself in the position of trying to compete with headlines.

– Anthony Hecht, *Letters*

Nothing in the world is deader than yesterday's political . . . poetry.

– Wallace Stevens, *Selected Letters*

As a working principle, the insights just quoted invite a hypothesis that poets learn to deploy their political views from within, after they face and name their griefs. Writers develop political awareness – as opposed to polemics or ideology – when they recognize that the conflicts of their own hearts and minds have universal extension, turning the unrests in their psyches into articulations others can apprehend. Topicality alone does not make poetry; when imaginative writers need to “compete with headlines” they are generally better served by journalism. Art, on the other hand, requires equal attention to individual experience and the whole of

the human condition aligned in parallel such that, for instance, twenty-first-century readers can continue to relive the pity and terror of Greek tragedy. Again, it is possible to trace parallels between the specific and the general only by granting the premise that public and private, individual and collective realms can be bridged and that building such a bridge is an inherently political activity, if we understand *polis* in its widest meaning.

These observations are broad enough to admit comparisons between almost any two writers, but they serve here as a starting point for establishing likenesses between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Anthony Hecht, poets whose kinship is not readily apparent, though it becomes clear on a second look that Goethe influenced Hecht as an intellectual, moral, and artistic forebear. The younger poet's debt to Goethe took two major forms; Hecht called on him intertextually, especially when enacting grave affliction, and he made several translations of Goethe's poems. In a double allusion, to cite one example, Hecht's poem "More Light! More Light!" (from *The Hard Hours*) depicts killings at the Buchenwald concentration camp as one episode in a whole history of atrocities. The title quotes Goethe's purported dying words, and the poem is set partly in a camp just outside Weimar, the city of Schiller, Wieland, and above all Goethe. Hecht notes in his letters that by invoking Goethe and the whole German Enlightenment he was purposely emphasizing the special desecration connected with making Weimar and nearby Buchenwald sites of torture and killing. As for translating Goethe, right at the start of his career, in 1947, Hecht translated the famous song by Mignon in book 3 of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship), "Kennst du das Land," as "Know You That Land" for the literary magazine *Hika*, and his rendering of "Lied und Gebilde" (literally, "Song and Image") from book 1, the "Buch des Sängers" (The Singer's Book) of Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan) appeared over fifty years after his first effort in his last volume, *The Darkness and the Light* (2001). Hecht had reworked that poem more than once, and he also translated Goethe's "Epiphantias" as "Epiphany," a version he apparently never published.

However aware Hecht might have been of Goethe's essential influence in helping him find his own way, we can first observe a similar overall trajectory in the development of the two poets and

then propose more specific points of likeness in their handling of political topics and themes. Like many others, both poets began as gifted technicians with nothing very compelling to say about human experience, since they were still learning by imitation, not yet able to extend their personal conflicts to enactments of general affliction. To adapt a phrase from Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech, they had not yet discovered how to make their "griefs grieve on any universal bones" in writing about "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."

Goethe's earliest poems were Arcadian costume pieces, technically skilled imitations of rococo and anacreontic verse. Not much more could be expected of poems written when the author was eight or nine years old! But by about 1770, to quote the Goethe scholar Erich Trunz, "In his restless soul full of yearning the elements of a new upheaval were lying ready. . . . He had managed once before to speak directly about what he was feeling . . . his artistic powers had been growing in the meantime" (all translations mine unless otherwise noted). The ensuing poems of his so-called Sturm und Drang period and the novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (The Sorrows of Young Werther) are energized by tension between intransigent nay-saying to authority and power and the need to submit to social structures as a means of sheer survival without sacrificing individual ideals and passions, to mediate between rebellion and conformity. Having found his authentic voice in his early twenties by learning how to expand the individual into the universal, Goethe would remain genuine through every phase of his creative life and political activity in his capacity as a privy counselor at the Weimar court.

As if the routine horrors of combat were not enough to provide any writer with ample "material," Hecht was one of the first Allied soldiers to have close contact with survivors when the concentration camps were liberated. Because of his facility in German and other languages, he was assigned early in 1945 to interview prisoners at Flössenburg, the camp at which the anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been killed only days before Hecht's arrival and at which dozens of inmates were dying of disease every day. The experience overwhelmed him to the point that he suffered terrifying nightmares and woke up screaming for years afterward. The intensity of the trauma must have rendered him

unable to voice it for a long time, because his first collection, *A Summoning of Stones* (1954), bears no trace of these horrors. The volume is a triumph of elegance, wit, polish, urbanity, and virtuosic command of intricate structures by a staunch formalist. No griefs yet, or at best highly stylized ones. Goethe had typified his new-found poetic power in 1773 by conjuring Prometheus, fiercely defiant Titan unafraid to topple the old order, while Hecht named his collection after a figure of harmony, of sweetness and light, of concord shaped from the bliss his art evokes. Orpheus uses the stones he summons to build up, not tear down. Any tension in the collection named after Orpheus is accordingly rarified, playfully dialectical and intellectual, and according to Jonathan F. S. Post in the *Yale Review*, it is “informed by an underlying principle of universal opposition and difference, of comparisons that beget contrasts, contrasts that invite comparisons,” but devoid of urgency or pain. W. H. Auden, to whom Hecht showed some of these early poems, found much to praise but criticized the overabundance of detail and found them, as quoted by Post, “‘somewhat impersonal’” and “‘disengaged from the central emotion of the poem.’”

By contrast, Hecht’s second collection, published thirteen years later, records personal and artistic upheavals. The very title, *The Hard Hours*, announces a poetry now forged from anguish and sorrow. Childhood tensions join with the traumas of war and a divorce (entailing separation from his children) so wrenching that it led to psychiatric hospitalization for three months. Hecht’s ability to break through to full poetic utterance seems to have hinged crucially as well on his coming to accept himself as a Jew, which enabled him to tap his own heritage of trauma and persecution. In interviews with J. D. McClatchy in the *Paris Review*, Hecht admitted that initially he considered his Jewishness “a painful embarrassment” but grew to be “no longer in the least ashamed,” now drawing on his legacy as his major source of identification with all of human suffering. To quote Post, “Engaging the central emotions of a poem would mean . . . engaging with his Jewish identity.” In “Rites and Ceremonies” from *The Hard Hours*, Hecht creates a historical continuity by enacting Jewish ritual down the ages, which supports him in confronting the anti-Semitism of his respected model, T. S. Eliot. In “It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It,” the crushing presence of the father in *Hamlet* is re-

placed by a father who realizes that, far from having the power to move inanimate objects like Orpheus, he would have been unable to save his children from the gas ovens. Situating his Jewishness as a universal junction point of Western culture, Hecht can now write about the Holocaust while placing it in parallel with earlier instances of torture and oppression, seamlessly linking politics, history, and his individual experience. He is now able to voice his griefs, and they now grieve on universal bones. His distinctive play of dialectics engages states of soul, not just detached intellectual antinomies, and his sense of polarities would culminate many years later in that antithesis between the two elemental forces of the darkness and the light, to cite the title of his last collection.

Cataclysms as massive as the one between *A Summoning of Stones* and *The Hard Hours* are often accompanied by correspondingly drastic formal and stylistic changes. Especially when a poet's work acquires an emotional immediacy previously absent, readers might well expect forms that appear more improvised or spontaneous. But the one regard in which the first and second collections remained the same was in their stringent, well-nigh patrician formality and polish. While formality is often misjudged as an intricate but superficial exercise in dazzling surface technique with a resultant evasion of genuine human engagement, Hecht would have learned from Goethe that formality need not deflect profound emotion but can discipline it so as not to turn maudlin or indiscriminately confessional. (No doubt Hecht learned this lesson from Baudelaire as well, a poet he likewise translated often and who combined utmost formality with harrowing, violent, even squalid content.) Goethe's Sturm und Drang poems are mighty bursts of transgressive youthful emotion, indignant and rapturous by turns with their heightened rhetoric and feverish intensity, but they are also works of sovereign formal perfection in meter, rhyme, rhythm, and stanzaic balance. What points to the specific influence of Goethe in Hecht's choice to retain formality is the citation of the title "More Light! More Light!" in *The Hard Hours*. The quotation achieves extra valence by appearing in the table of contents, and Hecht would repeat that homage in his next book, *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977), which contains a poem titled "Dichtung und Wahrheit" (Poetry and Truth), also the title of Goethe's autobiography. Those two allusions hail from Goethe's

old age, a significance to be explored later, but the emphatic role formality constantly plays in the work of both poets brings us to the first of the more specific points underscoring their commonality.

Categorical binary statements are, as in the well-known Goethe statement “I call Classicism healthy and Romanticism sick,” intentionally reductive points of departure toward more nuanced views. Indeed, Goethe tempered his blanket pronouncement with nuances and exceptions at once, but the fact of his making it so emphatically in the first place points to a climate of polemic. Both he and Hecht came of age when questions of artistic structure and form, of aesthetic approaches and attitudes, were freighted more heavily than usual with meaning as indications of wider views politically, socially, psychologically. Both poets entered their maturity when adherence to established forms, to tradition, to renewal through a look backward at the heritage of Greek and Latin culture and a privileging of the standard Western canon (“Classicism” as Goethe is using the term), were being widely disparaged as politically regressive and culturally conformist. To its opponents, in 1810 as well as in 1950, classicism implied servility to the past, alignment of oneself and one’s art with external authority, assent in authoritarian social structures purportedly grounded in the order of nature, subordination of individual temperament and chastening of immediate emotion, avoidance of experimentation in favor of rootedness in time-honored genres and structures. Through their very premises, these categories have political implications as strong as the new ones meant to supersede them. “Romanticism” – here too we can adapt Goethe’s general understanding to our own purposes – favored spontaneity, impulsiveness, the rhapsodic and seemingly improvised shape of a fragmentary or unfinished form, exoticism of setting, and redefinition, not to say overthrow, of the canon in favor of the less highly wrought qualities of ballads, folk poetry, and bardic utterance.

Protean Goethe was a master of all these modes. He and Schiller had a friendly competition in 1797 that produced a brilliant body of ballads in imitation of older folk models, for example. Even so, Goethe vehemently rejected the premises of looseness and improvisation on which Romanticism was based, as Hecht would later do. A clarifying parallel may help. Major essays

like “Self-Reliance” and “The American Scholar” made Ralph Waldo Emerson the fountainhead of American Romanticism, and he accordingly hailed Whitman’s collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855), with its free verse, demotic language, and democratic views, as the colloquial poetic masterwork he had always dreamed of. Likewise, Friedrich Schlegel’s theories were the founding critical documents of German Romanticism. Schlegel argued in 1798 that literature needed to be “a progressive universal poetry” that would combine and unite all genres. That approach, in Schlegel’s words, “aims by turns at combining and fusing poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, poetry of high polish and poetry of nature, making poetry a living and social entity and life and society poetic.” Schlegel’s cast of mind blurs contours, as it must, because his critical process is associative and intuition-based, hospitable to and indeed generative of linkage and fusion. Taxonomies and classifications, hallmarks of classical or Enlightenment thinking, are incompatible with such a malleable approach. “Progressive universal poetry” cannot by its nature be clearly defined; its very essence puts emphasis on fluidity, amalgamation, synthesis, juxtaposition. “Universal” folds all genres, periods, styles, modes, and tones into one cosmic sensibility, and “progressive” claims malleability and unceasing organic development for that sensibility.

Goethe construed that lack of definite boundaries as chaos; likewise Hecht a century and a half later. When Schlegel hailed Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meister* as a model of progressive and universal process in its fusion of genres, Goethe rejected any thought that strict form and structure were not paramount. His art balanced between antitheses, after all, and these were held in equilibrium by upholding form.

Insistence on strict form and structure, the primacy of law as the necessary precondition for artistic mastery, runs as a constant through the work of Hecht as well. His study of W. H. Auden’s poetry is titled *The Hidden Law*, and he emphasizes his subject’s craft and discipline as the means whereby Auden could realize his “vision” in a body of work first apprehended through the intellect. Again, when Hecht published his A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, he titled the book *On the Laws of the Poetic Art*. And in practice, for example, he strongly disparaged Galway Kinnell’s decision to omit rhyme when translating François Villon. If a

poet's "careful deftness of deployment of words appointed to appear at rhyming positions is surgically removed by the translator, we are being given something very diluted, and, from my point of view, unsatisfactory," Hecht states in his *Letters*.

This favoring of classical structure against Romantic fluidity has political and psychological corollaries. Goethe judged Romanticism as sick because it encourages dangerously misleading views of reality. In his later years, according to Trunz, he saw in Romanticism "the danger of an inspired subjectivism that confuses the intensity of a statement with its validity." The French Revolution, the emergence of Napoleon, and the German nationalism that arose in reaction were symptoms of ruinous Romantic self-indulgence. Goethe was hostile to them all. In Goethe's age the embodiment of catastrophic Romantic impulse run riot was Napoleon, in Hecht's time Hitler.

Modern American poetry underwent just as serious a rift between classicism and Romanticism as did the literature of Goethe's time. The "Romantic" impulse, inspired by Whitman's ostensibly free-form spontaneity, largely accounts for the demotic craft and anarchic vision of the Beat poets as well as the radical experiments in meter and rhythm of individuals like Louis Zukofsky and groups like the Black Mountain school. By contrast, the formalists with whom Hecht consciously allied himself were deliberate about the traditionalism of their craft. Even when they began moving toward outwardly looser structures, patrician easterners like Robert Lowell and James Merrill continued to draw significant energy from formalists like Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, for example, as did the southern Agrarian poets like John Crowe Ransom, Hecht's teacher, and Allen Tate. While Hecht did not align himself with these poets' social views, he emulated their craft, for which he had high praise; as we know from his *Letters*, he was rapturous about Merrill's intricately formal "Lost in Translation" as "one of the finest poems of our time."

Hecht could and did appreciate the disciplined free verse of a craftsman such as William Carlos Williams, but he took occasion to assess a number of less competent poets as mired in shameless self-absorption, "sickening narcissism," producing work "rank with self-pity," vices empowered by slovenliness. Their ideologically self-righteous work is the result of incompetence empower-

ing unlimited self-absorption, the same offense that had alienated Goethe. As if to emphasize further the realization that artistic technique has political implications, Hecht rebukes recent contemporaries, sardonically grounding their defective craft in the language of the Declaration of Independence (polis again). In his interview with McClatchy, Hecht speaks of how “the inalienable rights of Americans were deemed to include Free Love, Free Verse, and the Pursuit of Sloppiness.”

Formalists – classicists – are more likely to maintain demarcations between genres than Romanticists, but poetic mediations on the other arts have been broad common practice for centuries, as attested by innumerable *Gemäldegedichte*, by Yeats on Byzantine artifacts, Rilke on the torso of Apollo or Keats on the Grecian urn, Dryden on Saint Cecilia and music or Lorca on the guitar – the list is endless. Hecht’s fascination with painting, sculpture, architecture, and music is evidenced everywhere, so it is no wonder he identified closely with Goethe’s kindred practice, enough so as to incorporate his translation of “Lied und Gebilde” (as “The Poetic and the Plastic Form”) into his own last volume, *The Darkness and the Light*. Goethe and Hecht reconcile both sides of the seeming dichotomy between similarities among the arts (Horace) and their apparently antithetical natures (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing) by enacting a unity that subsumes opposition. “Lied” (song) and “Gebilde” (image) require fundamentally different technical skills but have mastery of craft in common; darkness and light are contrasting properties unified from the standpoint of eternity by Hecht’s invoking Scripture; the title of the last poem in his collection *The Darkness and the Light* quotes Psalm 139:2, “The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee.’”

The respective collections in which each poem appears reflect the equipoise of old age and a heightened religious awareness enabling their authors to achieve complex artistic balances while touching on themes far beyond the purely aesthetic. The very titles of the individual poems equalize antinomies, as do the collections, achieving equilibrium between energies generally thought irreconcilable. In Goethe’s case, it is no exaggeration to claim for his volume *West-Östlicher Divan* a status occupied by no other work of Western literature in its total, unqualified embrace of Near Eastern poetry, religion, and politics by an iconic European.

Goethe casts the *West-Östlicher Divan* as an extended homage to the poetry of Hafiz. The *Divan* is a truly singular instance, occupying a class of one, in its freedom from the biases Edward Said designated as Orientalism in his landmark study. Orientalism, a distortion caused by colonial thinking, is an almost universal tendency of Western culture to project its power needs, erotic fantasies, and fears onto a fantasized “mysterious East.” In his later *Parallels and Paradoxes*, Said specifically praised the *Divan*, “this extraordinary set of poems about the ‘other’ really, . . . which is, I think, unique in the history of European culture,” and reminds us that “art, for Goethe especially, was all about a voyage to the ‘other,’ and not concentrating on oneself, which is very much a minority view today. . . . It’s become quite rare to project oneself outward, to have a broader perspective.” Goethe’s organic fusion of East and West and his correspondingly unstinting refusal to project an “other” are so seamless a fusion of sheer antithesis with total amalgamation that the *Divan* has periodically returned in times of crisis as virtually a guide to cultural and political reconciliation.

If Hecht’s *The Darkness and the Light* does not attain the stature of the *Divan*, neither does almost any other collection of poetry. The comparison is inherently unfair in that Goethe is one of the five or six truly defining figures of Western literature but also in that Hecht’s late collection is in its own dimensions, like Goethe’s, a summative achievement by a major poet who had spent his life learning to balance order and chaos, violence and serenity, acceptance and doubt. By the time Goethe between sixty-five and seventy confronted the depredations of Napoleon through parallels to the era of Hafiz, he had achieved the ability to link oppositions into a higher unity, a trait many commentators consider a chief hallmark of work by artists in their old age. In *Last Looks, Last Books*, Helen Vendler terms this balancing tendency a “late binocular style” and finds it characteristic of poets as they approach the end. In Vendler’s words, that style can respect “both the aridity of age and the elasticity of regained vitality,” delineating not just the losses attendant on old age but weighing them against “its inquisitive appetite for knowledge, its lullabies in the midst of burial, and, even in its worst mental *rigor mortis*, the unexpected and solacing sensual warmth of memory.”

The Darkness and the Light manifests all these traits as Hecht,

after decades of poetic practice, emerged into that balancing and balanced late stage. We have noted how his first collection evaded through studied elegance the fears and struggles that would later become his meaningful themes: his direct experience of horror in wartime; his Jewish heritage; the aftermath of atrocity in the camps; a whole appalling history of persecution and torture. Once he broke through to this more authentic vision in *The Hard Hours*, he would need some thirty-five years gradually to amalgamate it with his passion for transcendent serenity and beauty, his penchant for wit and irony. McClatchy reminds us that Hecht's aesthetic perfection has caused the darkness of his vision to be overlooked: "It is crucial to remember how often Hecht takes this darkness as his subject. Few contemporary poets have so persistently and so strikingly come to terms with evil and violence in history, or what we literally call *human nature*. And throughout his four collections are occasions of madness, paranoia, catatonia, hallucination and dream; there are exile, plague, miscarriage, murder, genocide."

In addition to the last poem in his last book, with its fusion of light and dark outside of time and space, Hecht's collection everywhere manifests the binocular aspect and the other traits Vendler identifies as markers of late style. Hecht balances Abraham against Isaac and both in turn against an episode from 1945, during the Nazi occupation of Normandy ("Sacrifice"); he juxtaposes the extreme differences between Saul and David ("Saul and David"); he chooses immemorial images of sunset, of autumn and winter as times of aging and weakening in equilibrium with returning vitality ("Late Afternoon: The Onslaught of Love"; "A Certain Slant," with its allusion to Emily Dickinson's winter afternoons; "Long-Distance Vision"; "Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-seven," with its epigraph from George Herbert about the feebleness of old age played off against the stateliness of a formal dance and the realization that time is "Diminishing the cast, like musical chairs"; and above all the perfectly balanced last poem, with its last stanza about "the elderly and frail / . . . For whom the rising light / Entails their own eclipse, / Brightening as they fail"). Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon note in their study *Four Last Songs* that intimations of mortality and death may emerge in the work of even a young artist, but advanced age is an

inescapable theme for those who have reached it and must now ponder dwindling energy, diminished capacity, and imminent extinction, and counterbalance those losses, as did Wallace Stevens, with an awareness – to cite Vendler again – that “mortality confers a compensatory value” in a universe that “wills to create, against its own eternity, transience; against its own lifelessness, life; against its permanent cold, warmth.” As one of two poets who furnish epitaphs in *The Darkness and the Light* (the other is Keats), Stevens manifests an obvious kinship of which Hecht had to be fully aware.

The hard-won but genuine serenity gained by Stevens and Hecht has its ancestry in Goethe, whose late work and last years helped engender a positive assessment of the old as robust, wise, productive, and benevolent. Goethe knew he was considered an elder statesman – literally so; he was privy councilor to a prince – and a spokesperson for European culture at its most humanistic, and in making the most of his role as venerated representative of a great heritage, he caused a widespread reevaluation of old age as a time of late blooming. Himself occupying a prominent political office, Goethe purposely made a cultural and political issue (again, *polis*) of his manner of living at an advanced age.

Hecht knew his Goethe as well as his Stevens, both evident models in Hecht’s defense of himself and his art in old age. He likewise became aware that his craft had grown stronger with experience, despite contrary judgments, and he spiritedly declined to be relegated. Having been “dismissed as among ‘the Old Guys’” in a review of *Flight Among the Tombs*, he objected in a letter to Eleanor Cook dated 9 January 1997: “It’s not the fact that my age is held against me that bothers me. But as I stand tip-toe upon the threshold of my seventy-fifth year I have managed to preserve the comforting conviction that my work continues to improve. . . . It’s no mystery that most writers refuse to see their own weaknesses. At the same time, there are the heartening instances of Hardy and Sophocles.”

Hecht exercised the craft of translation throughout his creative life, most prominently in his last book. Fully a fifth of *The Darkness and the Light* consists of translations. As if he were intent on demonstrating his continued skill, some of these are newer versions of translations he had already presented or reworkings of

earlier efforts with which he was now satisfied enough to publish. In his essay on the early Hecht in the *Yale Review*, Jonathan F. S. Post captures Hecht's unhappiness when he refers to "the ghostliness of translation . . . Hecht's sense that an earlier favorite text still eluded or haunted him." The poet's own lament about the inherent failure of translation will be familiar to fellow practitioners. He wrote to Eleanor Cook in 2002:

As to translations, they are often things I dwell with for the longest time. I can fall in love with a poem in another tongue, and yearn to get it into some kind of English, and experiment year after year, almost always – no, always, with a sense of defeat, since no matter what I do, it will lack important elements that made the original what it is. In this book there's a version of Charles d'Orléans' "Le temps a laissé son manteau" [Once More, With Feeling] which I had tried at the outset to do in a version that appeared in my first book, published in 1954.

Likewise, Baudelaire's "The Ashen Light of Dawn" in *The Darkness and the Light* exists in several previous versions variously titled "Dawn's Twilight," "Twilight of Dawn," and "First Light," one of these renderings having been published earlier in *The Formalist*, and Baudelaire's "Le Jet d'Eau" (*The Darkness and the Light*) is an even more masterful version than an earlier one titled "The Fountain."

What may be Hecht's most notable translation, though, is the rendering from Goethe he included in *The Darkness and the Light*. (At the end of this essay will be found the original Goethe, a translation by John Whaley, and two translations by Hecht, one unpublished.) It fulfills the expected task of any translation by its fidelity, to use Hecht's desideratum, lexically reconstituting the original in content and form, and is a virtuosic achievement on those grounds alone. In addition, it performs an audacious and successful experiment by strategically altering the original to create a whole poem of Hecht's own – an act of homage or a *tombeau* – that is not in Goethe. That latter achievement surfaces, however, only when the reader considers the theme of youth versus age that forms an essential component of the *Divan* and of *The Darkness and the Light*.

The balance of manifold antitheses and oppositions signaled by the title of Hecht's last book is evident everywhere, beginning with the two epigraphs, one from Keats's sonnet "To Homer," the other from Stevens, "The Sun This March." Each epigraph contains its own opposition: Hecht selects from Keats the line "Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light," and from Stevens, "The exceeding brightness of this early sun / Makes me conceive how dark I have become." Further, Keats's evocation of Homer connects the father of Western literature, as he is generally considered, to Hecht's requisitioning a sonnet about him at the moment of assembling his own book. Hecht likewise quotes two more lines from the Stevens poem: "Oh! rabbi, rabbi, fend my soul for me / And a true savant of this dark nature be," reminding us in his amalgamating way, through the voice of a poet from a solid Pennsylvania Dutch Lutheran background, of his own undertaking to draw on his Jewish heritage and spirituality as ways of exploring human darkness. Darkness and light in both epigraphs; a mediation of ancient and modern via Keats; a fusion of Gentile and Jewish via Stevens.

In addition, Hecht's chosen poets form a stark contrast in age. Precocious Keats, as profound in contemplation of mortality as any poet, died at twenty-five; by the opposite token, Stevens not only lived to seventy-five but continued to gain in mastery. In his biography of Stevens, Paul Mariani sums up the prevailing assessment: "While many poets fall away from their earlier promise as they approach late middle age, Stevens was one of those who kept maturing and revitalizing himself in his poetry up to the very last." Stevens would accordingly have counted as one of "the Old Guys" in his own generation, and he was indeed sometimes devalued in his later years, but the model of a vitality undiminished to the end emerges in Hecht's letters, in his epigraph, and in witty tributes, as when he turned the title of one of his poems from an earlier collection to "Le Masseur de Ma Soeur" in homage to Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle."

Vendler points out that the sustenance and renewal poets experience in old age cannot be sustained without an imaginative reliving of youth. In retrospect, for example, Stevens is "once again . . . deep in the moment of embrace, the past moment now not looked at from a frigid distance, as before, but conveyed in the

heady immersion of recovered sensation.” Recollections of youth are similarly essential to the restoration of youth in Hecht’s volume – of his own, as in “Mirror,” “An Orphic Calling,” or “Nocturne: A Recurring Dream,” but also of a particular archetypal youth memorialized in a deft, covert tribute. Let us work toward it.

The tribute or homage is contained in the poem that Goethe did not write and begins to emerge from the one he did when we note some differences. It is significant that Hecht tends to create specifics out of Goethe’s more generic vocabulary. There are no lexical correspondences in Goethe, for example, to Hecht’s “urn” (a more general “Gestalten” or “shapes” in the original) or “beauty.” The Greek in Goethe is not a “youth,” as in Hecht. His age is unspecified in Goethe, but he is old enough to have at least a metaphorical son who delights him (“An der eignen Hände Sohn / Steigern sein Entzücken” – “Through their child his hands in play / Thrill on thrill expressing,” in John Whaley’s translation). Being a father need not mean being middle-aged or old, to be sure, but Hecht creates a youthfulness and an absence of paternity not present in Goethe. Nor does Goethe speak of the “vision” that Hecht includes; in fact, Goethe does not mention sight at all. While the second stanza of Goethe emphasizes the delight of creation – “wonnereich” and “hin und wieder schweifen” are terms that connote pleasant, not painful, exertion – Hecht’s corresponding stanza invokes the “poet’s sterner test”: making a poem is harder than molding clay, which consists of having to grapple with flowing water in a state of “unrest,” “fluid in evasion” as against unmoving but malleable earth. Hecht emphasized travail more than does Goethe, who refers simply to the “liquid element” (“flüss’gen Element”), whereas Hecht lends the water the agent-like ability to exercise “evasion.” Fire (“Brand”) is another of the ancient elements Goethe draws on to describe the burning in the soul that yields to song if the poet can mold the water successfully, but Hecht’s equivalent (“Duly bathed and cooled”) creates another image of water, bypassing fire altogether and making water more predominant in the translation than in the original, an emphasis reinforced by the greater prevalence of “flowing” enjambment in the translation than in Goethe. The poet’s shaping of water in Hecht makes him a more direct agent than in Goethe, who uses an

ingenious wordplay – “schöpft” refers to the act of creation but also of dipping or ladling – to signal the poet’s activity. If the poet’s hand is skilled, then the water will yield itself to being shaped; that is, the element itself will “consent” to being formed, as it were, in Goethe, whereas Hecht makes it “fluid in evasion.” In Hecht, the poet’s “forming hand” is itself the one agent that shapes the water, which by its nature puts up resistance, far from “consenting.” In Goethe, a song will resound (“Lied, es wird erschallen”) as an entity on its own, independent of the exertions of the creator, while in Hecht it is the poet’s mind that, with greater immediacy and more direct causality between creator and poem, “will utter / Liquid song,” “Liquid” again stressing the primacy of water. Finally, Goethe’s speaker includes himself as the working poet, referring to “uns” (us) in the second stanza and “ich” (I) in the third. Hecht, by contrast, confines the activity to the “Greek youth” alone, generalizing him into “the poet” in the second stanza but keeping pronoun references in the third person throughout, focusing solely on the poet at his arduous task of shaping water until he reaches the state of “ardorless” creation, exertion yielding to spontaneity.

Would any reader of poetry bypass “urn” in Hecht’s second line and the “beauty, gladdening the eye” in his third without thinking of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” with its famous statement by the urn reinforced through repetition of “beauty” (and “truth”) in the same line? Could the key reference to “beauty” in the “Ode to a Nightingale” escape notice? Would not the thematically central references to music and youth in both Keats odes, the ecstatic invocation of wine as a cooling liquid to soothe the mind, the impaired vision in the darkness of the Nightingale Ode, the struggle for articulation all suggest a conscious homage to Keats? In Hecht’s translation, it is the poet’s “mind,” not his vocal apparatus or other physical instrument, that will “utter / Liquid song,” recalling the second stanza of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.” The inscription Keats chose for his tombstone, “Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water,” could well have informed Hecht’s choice of stressing water more than did Goethe, especially since Hecht’s poet is pictured as

molding and shaping the water himself and thus to a degree both reversing or negating the judgment Keats made about the transitoriness of his own work and recognizing in retrospect as a triumph of enduring art what to Keats himself could only have seemed a calamity. We could further cite a letter Hecht wrote about the function of personal suffering in Keats's Nightingale Ode to argue that Hecht shaped a tribute to Keats clearly beyond the scope of Goethe's intention, eloquently deploying anew the trope of "ars longa, vita brevis" in a way that creates two distinct poems in one, a generic study of creativity and a tribute to a specific creator.

Again, griefs, not grievances. Having passed beyond the aestheticism that camouflages suffering, Hecht found a way of tapping into grief without self-indulgence. He writes in a letter that the "native desire to turn deficit into profit becomes dangerous when it turns to an habitual need for misery to make poems out of." Keats, profoundly sorrowful at knowing he would die so young, transmuted that sorrow without negating it; Stevens and Hecht, aware of their impending end, likewise transformed loss into gain through the equilibrium art provides.

Lied und Gebilde

Mag der Grieche seinen Ton
Zu Gestalten drücken,
An der eignen Hände Sohn
Steigern sein Entzücken;

Aber uns ist wonnereich
In den Euphrat greifen,
Und im flüss'gen Element
Hin und wieder schweifen.

Löscht' ich so der Seele Brand,
Lied, es wird erschallen;
Schöpft des Dichters reine Hand,
Wasser wird sich ballen.

[Goethe, *Divan*]

Song and Form

Leave the Greek his earth and clay
Into forms compressing,
Through their child his hands in play
Thrill on thrill expressing:

We, though, grasp our own delight
In Euphrates river,
In the liquid element
Roaming hither, thither.

When I've quenched my soul's hot brand
Song pours out resounding;
Purely scooped by poet's hand
Water's shaped and rounding.

[Whaley]

Earlier Version

Let that Greek youth form an urn
 Out of clay, and fashion
 Beauty, as his wheel may turn
 Equal to his passion.

But for us a harder test
 Urges him to seize on
 A Euphrates of unrest,
 Fluid in evasion.

Coolly bathed, at last the mind,
 Ardorless, will utter
 Song, the poet's forming hand
 Lend a shape to water.

[Hecht Archive]

The Plastic and the Poetic Form

Let that Greek youth out of clay
 Mold an urn to fashion
 Beauty, gladdening the eye
 With deft-handed vision.

But the poet's sterner test
 Urges him to seize on
 A Euphrates of unrest,
 Fluid in evasion.

Duly bathed and cooled, his mind,
 Ardorless, will utter
 Liquid song, his forming hand
 Lend a shape to water.

[Hecht, *The Darkness and the Light*]