

## THE CONSTRAINTS OF AESTHETICS

by James Aitchison

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On the Laws of the Poetic Art

by ANTHONY HECHT

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The title of this book is misleading. If Anthony Hecht had explored the properties of language and form in poetry, or the ways in which the creative imagination transmutes language into poems, or the nature of the experience of poetry — if, that is, he had written on the laws of the poetic art, then his book would have been more satisfying than it is. Hecht's textual analyses in *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* confirm that he is a judicious critic, a reader whose intelligence is allied to sympathy and understanding. In several analyses — Wallace Stevens's 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds', Hardy's 'During Wind and Rain', Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Yeats's 'Adam's Curse' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter' — Hecht reveals truths about our condition that only the poet as critic can reveal. But these revelations appear as occasional essays in what is, in fact, a brief history of aesthetics.

Perhaps Hecht was constrained by circumstances. The book consists of his A W Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts delivered at the U. S. National Gallery of Art in 1992, and Hecht is clearly concerned to observe aesthetic rather than creative criteria. Although there is no necessary conflict between the aesthete and the creative artist, aesthetics is primarily the concern of the critic in his role of connoisseur and arbiter of taste; aesthetics is not the primary concern of the creator. The laws known to the maker of works of art, laws of the imagination and of the medium in which it works, are as important and exciting as those known to the critic but, apart from his comments in Lecture 2 on the spirit of play in the making of a work of art, Hecht offers few insights into the creative process.

Aesthetic criteria, along with the constraints of the occasion, lead him to find, or claim to find, close similarities between poetry and painting, and between poetry and music. In 'Poetry and Painting', Hecht discusses some paintings and then asserts that they "clearly have a relationship to literary and poetic domains", and that they "take on almost literary qualities"; but he does not identify the domains or the qualities. The differences between poetry and painting, one suggests, are greater and more important than the similarities. Fundamental differences are that a painting enters the viewer's mind as a number of simultaneous sensory impressions: colours, light and shadows, textures, brush strokes and the overall configuration of the composition; a poem, by contrast, enters the mind by way of the intellect and proceeds, as it must, by linear progression. Almost all poems contain visual images and thus excite the visual imagination in some way, but not in the same way as painting. In the same lecture, Hecht notes how the picture frame defines the picture, and then he adds, "nothing in our visual experience is framed". But surely our daily experience is framed and significantly mediated by car windscreens, computer and television screens as well as by windows and doorways; and

much of our knowledge of ourselves and the universe comes from the round frame of the microscope and the previously round frame of the telescope. Hecht stresses “the importance of direct ocular experience and its incontestable empirical value to the artist”, but he says nothing about the transfiguring vision of the artist, what the artist sees with his eyes closed.

The second lecture, ‘Poetry and Music’, begins with the kind of intolerance that Hecht later denounces in politicians: Mozart is better than Wagner because Mozart’s ‘Jupiter’ Symphony (Symphony No 41) is a work of “crystalline clarity” whereas Wagner’s Prelude to Tristan and Isolde “resembles that viscid modern genre known as “elevator music”.” Hecht then quotes an authority to support his opinion, a tactic he uses throughout the book; in this instance his authority is Stravinsky’s *Poetics of Music*, published in 1942, by which time Stravinsky had become a habitual denigrator of composers he saw as rivals. If we acknowledge that music makes a more immediately emotional appeal to our auditory imagination than poetry does, possibly because music and emotion are usually functions of the right hemisphere of the brain and language a function of the left, then we can acknowledge that the emotional element in our musical judgement can make the same piece of music sound as euphony or cacophony in the minds of different listeners.

Poetry and music come together in song, and Hecht refers to Debussy’s settings of poems by Villon, Baudelaire, Verlaine and others. It may also be worth noting that the emotional power of music is such that it can disguise the triteness and absurdity of the words of opera, of lieder and *lieder*-like songs and of hymns; in song, language and music are not equal partners. One agrees with Hecht when he writes, “Poetry’s music is involved with its shapeliness”, but one has to add that the shapeliness of poetry is fundamentally different from that of music. Most forms of music proceed by repetition or near-repetition of phrases and themes, by the ‘vertical’ progression of different notes, and sometimes different melodies and rhythms, played simultaneously, and by linear progression. Poetry today seldom uses repetition. The refrain is avoided simply because it is repetitive, and because such repetition sounds distracting and archaic in twentieth century poetry. Even in metrical, rhyming poetry that proceeds by parallelism — “We have slaughtered the lynx and the bear. / We have poisoned the wolf in its lair. / Now our children have nothing to fear.” — there is nothing like the note-for-note, phrase-for-phrase repetition of music. And because of the linear nature of our writing system, poetry cannot use ‘vertical’ progression. The true natures of poetry, painting and music are found in their differences, not in their similarities.

By far the most satisfying lecture in *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* is ‘Paradise and Wilderness’. Hecht offers succinct summaries of the literature of the garden as paradise, of the symbolisms and mythologies of paradise and wilderness, and of the paradoxes of wilderness as a form of paradise, and of paradise within the wilderness. These are followed by the most authoritative, the most revealing and the most elegantly structured sequence in the book: the extended discussion of *The Tempest*. Hecht identifies and clarifies the play’s creative ambiguities in an analysis that is both delicate and masterly. He explains the complex, sometimes complementary, themes of the noble and the savage, the noble and ignoble savage, civilization and barbarity, loving wisdom

and lusting ignorance, without diminishing their complexity; he offers insights into the mystery of our humanity without diminishing the mystery. And yet, even at the risk of turning this review into a carping catalogue, one has to note Hecht's omissions. For the artist, paradise and wilderness are states of mind, states of being. The experience of wilderness that occurs in the making of a poem, the sense of chaos, of being hopelessly lost — that experience is so widespread that it must be an integral part of the creative process.

The least satisfying lecture is the last one, 'Poetry and Morality', largely because Hecht treats morality at the level of social and political conformity rather than artistic vision. The truth of poetry rests mainly in the truth of imagination, and the truth of imagination is expressed mainly through the poet's vision; the very fact that the poet seeks truths means that his vision is often a moral one. In some poems — not necessarily great poems but poems that are honest and well made — there is another, perhaps higher, form of morality: the poetic vision that unifies disparate things and reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable in a state of harmony. Hecht says nothing about these things. Instead, he discusses the nude in paintings by Velazquez, Giorgione and Manet, and he makes a passing reference to expressions of sexuality in the work of Lawrence, Joyce and Nabokov. Hecht then turns to the topic that, for him, is the main moral issue: art and political ideology.

He lists the painters and musicians who were deemed "degenerate" in Nazi Germany; he refers to tyrannical regimes in Japan and Italy but not the Soviet Union; and he notes the tyrant's preference for heroic realism in art. He poses great questions, and then offers the non-answer: "This uniformity of taste, to be observed not only in painting, sculpture and music of these totalitarian regimes but in their architecture as well, ought to speak volumes to thoughtful men and women". Surely part of the answer is that the tyrant and his committees of censors prefer heroic realism, or heroic idealism, in art, because these modes promote the idea of the power and unity of the state. For the tyrannical politician and thus for the tyrannical state, all great art is political and all non-conformist art is politically threatening; the creative imagination deviates, as it must, from the conformist imagination, and so the artist is seen by tyrants and philistines as a deviant.

The book ends on a pessimistic note with an ill-judged attack on American politicians. Implicit in Hecht's closing argument is the assumption that the artist is morally superior to the politician, but those conditions of mind that allow an individual to be a good — that is, an effective — artist allow only that; different conditions of mind are required if the good artist is to be a good father or a good citizen. Hecht's last words on the world of American politics and morality seem ambivalent. He writes, "It is a world in which learning and the arts themselves are manipulated by and for political ends, and questions of taste are referred directly to plebiscite [sic] opinion." In a democracy, the politician must submit himself and his views to plebiscite opinion, and must accept that opinion. How could it be otherwise in a democracy? The artist elects himself and need be accountable to no one; but when he makes his work public and asks for payment, then he must accept that, in a democracy, his work may be subjected to whatever political and popular comment the laws of democracy allow.