

# The New Criterion

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## Anthony Hecht & landscape

by [David Yezzi](#)

*On the uses of landscape in the poems of Anthony Hecht.*

Any number of fine poems memorialize poets—W. H. Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” for example, or, in a less reverent vein, Tom Disch’s “At the Grave of Amy Clampitt,” written, oddly, while Clampitt was still alive. Such poems tend to announce either affinity or difference, friendship or rivalry, as one poet suggests—either critically or cordially—his relationship to the person or work of another. The poet J. D. McClatchy has an exemplary poem in the admiring vein titled “Auden’s O.E.D.,” which fondly recounts McClatchy’s first meeting with Auden. As a student at Yale, McClatchy buttonholed the elder poet after a reading and nervously asked him if Auden would sign his book. Auden took stock of this eager young chap and told him to bend over. Auden, you see, wanted to use McClatchy’s back as a writing desk. McClatchy then reverses the image to suggest, in a witty and touching homage to the master, that he has been writing on Auden’s back ever since.

One reason for the success of this fine poem, I think, is that it allows readers to imagine briefly that they, too, have met Auden or at least could have. I sometimes wonder, if I were to attempt to write such a poem, whom I would choose to write about. Where are the Audens of today? On whose back would one hope to write?

If I have a story along the lines of McClatchy’s poem—of meeting a poet who became, not a mentor exactly, but a model—then it would be the story of meeting Anthony Hecht at the West Chester Poetry Conference. Now that Hecht is gone (he died in October of last year), I cherish the memories of his teaching and reading more deeply than ever. Only last summer, Hecht spoke at the conference on a panel devoted to “Religion and Poetry.” In a short, beautifully wrought, and carefully considered talk, he demonstrated how Thomas Hardy, that reputed skeptic, did not dismiss questions of faith but rather engaged them. In typical fashion, Hecht’s remarks were quietly devastating.

Hecht’s remarks on Hardy reminded me of something he once said to Philip Hoy, in Hoy’s invaluable book-length interview with Hecht. Hoy identifies the recurring image of the hill in Hecht’s poems, to which Hecht responds: “You are perfectly right to see arid and defeated landscapes cropping up in a good number of my poems, as is the case with certain winter scenes of Breughel. They were for me a means to express a desolation of the soul. There are such scenes in Hardy.”

Hecht poems make use of landscape in several different ways, drawing on a technique of Hardy and also of E. A. Robinson. Yvor Winters, in his marvelous book *Edwin Arlington Robinson* contrasts Hardy’s landscapes with landscape as it figures in the poems of Robinson: “Hardy describes the natural landscape in detail and implies the human tragedy. Robinson analyzes the tragedy and implies the landscape.”

In the case of Hardy, I think immediately of a poem like “During Wind and Rain,” where the image

of droplets running over a gravestone brings into sharp focus the dissolution of a household, or “Neutral Tones,” which begins:

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

And then, of course, there is “The Darkling Thrush,” in which

The land’s sharp features seemed to be  
The Century’s corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament.  
The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

Hardy’s description of the natural surroundings captures not only the tragic psychology of his speaker but of an entire era.

Robinson, on the other hand, Winters suggests, describes the situation and implies the landscape. In Robinson’s great poem “Eros Turannos,” a marriage fails against the bleak backdrop of a Maine seascape:

The falling leaf inaugurates  
The reign of her confusion;  
The pounding wave reverberates  
The dirge of her illusion.  
And Home, where passion lived and died,  
Becomes a place where she can hide,  
While all the town and harbor side  
Vibrate with her seclusion.

By the end of this stanza, the description of the landscape ceases to shed light on the psychology of the character; instead, the psychology of the character actively infuses the landscape. A tension exists in Hardy and Robinson between poems that foreground landscape (which then suggests the psychology of a situation) and those that foreground a human drama (which then suggests or colors the landscape). Hecht capably makes use of both of these strategies, and even surpasses them by deploying one of his own.

In Hecht’s breathtaking early rumination “A Hill,” he writes:

. . . the noises suddenly stopped,  
And it got darker; pushcarts and people dissolved  
And even the great Farnese Palace itself  
Was gone, for all its marble; in its place  
Was a hill, mole-colored and bare. It was very cold,  
Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.  
The trees were like old ironwork gathered for scrap

Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,  
And the only sound for a while was the little click  
Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.  
I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a hedge,  
But no other sign of life. And then I heard  
What seemed the crack of a rifle. A hunter, I guessed;  
At least I was not alone. But just after that  
Came the soft and papery crash  
Of a great branch somewhere unseen falling to earth.

And that was all, except for the cold and silence  
That promised to last forever, like the hill.

The speaker goes on to say that the image of the hill hasn't troubled him since, but clearly it has troubled him, or *haunted* him as Hardy would say. The poem concludes:

And it hasn't troubled me since, but at last, today,  
I remembered that hill; it lies just to the left  
Of the road north of Poughkeepsie; and as a boy  
I stood before it for hours in wintertime.

As for a more Robinsonian method, in which situation colors or suggests the landscape, Hecht employs something like this approach in the final section of his later poem "Sacrifice," from *The Darkness and the Light*. Hecht's take in the poem on the sacrifice of Isaac begins with sections in the voices, first, of Abraham ("He led me, knowing where my heart would break,/ Into temptation") and, then, of Isaac himself ("We were sentenced and reprieved by the same Voice"). The third section, titled "1945," tells the story of a German soldier's encounter with a rural family in France in that year. The German army is in full retreat, the straggling infantry left to fend for themselves in the French countryside. As a precaution, the family disassembles their bicycle and conceals the parts in the upper boughs of their orchard. At dawn one morning, while the family is at breakfast, the soldier comes demanding a bicycle. The father explains that they have none. The soldier lacks the time to search the property, so he:

Judiciously singled out the eldest son,  
A boy perhaps fourteen, but big for his years,  
Obliging him to place himself alone  
Against the whitewashed front wall of the house.  
Then, at the infallible distance of ten feet,  
With rifle pointed right at the boy's chest,  
The soldier shouted what was certainly meant  
To be his terminal order: *BICYCLETTE!*

It was still early on a chilly morning.  
The water in the tire-treads of the road  
Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,  
Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves.  
The very grass was a stiff lead-crystal gray,  
Though splendidly prismatic where the sun  
Made its slow way between the lingering shadows  
Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.  
There was leisure enough to take full note of this  
In the most minute detail as the soldier held

Steady his index finger on the trigger.

It wasn't charity. Perhaps mere prudence,  
Saving a valuable round of ammunition  
For some more urgent crisis. Whatever it was,  
The soldier reslung his rifle on his shoulder,  
Turned wordlessly and walked on down the road  
The departed German vehicles had taken.

There followed a long silence, a long silence.  
For years they lived together in that house,  
Through daily tasks, through all the family meals,  
In agonized, unviolated silence.

In this poem, it is the terrible scene of a boy held at gunpoint that lends a special cast to the landscape. The description of the morning is not particularly bleak. Though the grass is a lead crystal gray, still it is crystal, and the sun shines on a road chalked with frost. Yet the landscape becomes as arid and defeated as the one in "A Hill" because of its placement in the drama, observed in a moment of eerie calm and terrible threat.

In his use of landscape, Hecht matches Hardy and Robinson (and here I would add Frost as well), and even arrives at a method that combines and intensifies their approaches. Hecht's great monologue "Death the Whore" begins with a landscape that haunts the addressee of the poem in ways reminiscent of "A Hill." The voice in the poem is the whore of the title:

Some thin gray smoke twists up against a sky  
Of German silver in the sullen dusk  
From a small chimney among leafless trees.  
The paths are empty, the weeds bent and dead;  
Winter has taken hold. And what, my dear,  
Does this remind you of? You are surprised  
By the familiar manner, the easy, sure  
Intimacy of my address. You wonder  
"Whose curious voice is this? Why should that scene  
Seem distantly familiar? Did something happen  
Back in my youth on a deserted path  
Late on some unremembered afternoon?"  
And now you'll feel at times a fretful nagging  
At the back of your mind as of something almost grasped  
But tauntingly and cunningly evasive.  
It may go on for months, perhaps for years.

And then:

. . . It lasted  
Almost two years. Two mainly happy years.  
In all that time, what did you learn of me?  
My name, my body, how best to go about  
Mutual arousal, my taste in food and drink  
And what would later be called "substances."  
(These days among my friends I might be called  
"A woman of substance" if I were still around.)  
You also learned, from a casual admission,

That I had twice attempted suicide.  
Tact on both sides had left this unexplored.  
We both seemed to like sex for the same reason.  
It was, as they used to say, a “little death,”  
A tiny interval devoid of thought  
When even sensation is so localized  
Only one part of the body seems alive.  
And when you left I began the downhill slope.  
First one-night stands; then quickly I turned pro  
In order to get all the drugs I wanted.  
My looks went fast. I didn’t really care.  
The thing that I’d been after from the first,  
With you, with sex, with drugs, was oblivion.  
So it was easy. A simple overdose  
Knocked back with half a bottle of good Scotch.

The very end of the poem returns to the landscape in a devastating new way: character *becomes* the landscape almost literally. Note that the passage, with which I’ll close, begins with a reference to the speaker’s cremation:

And then you leaned by chance or word of mouth  
That I had been cremated, thereby finding  
More of oblivion than I’d even hoped for.  
And now when I occur to you, the voice  
You hear is not the voice of what I was  
When young and sexy and perhaps in love,  
But the weary voice shaped in your later mind  
By a small sediment of fact and rumor,  
A faceless voice, a voice without a body.

As for the winter scene of which I spoke—  
The smoke, my dear, the smoke. I am the smoke.

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