John Donne Journal
Vol. 26 (2007)

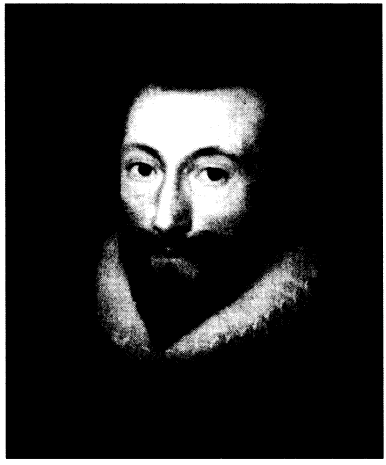
Donne, Discontinuity, and the Proto-Post Modern: The Case of Anthony Hecht

Jonathan F. S. Post

This essay is intended as a small footnote to what I assume most Donne scholars will readily agree is one of the more compelling sagas of literary history in our time: the story of Donne's role in the creation of a high modernist aesthetic, usually tracked through T. S. Eliot. And a place to begin is with a remark made in 1955 by the poet James Wright. "We must realize," wrote Wright to Donald Hall, "that the metaphysical lyric, though gloriously demonstrated in the age just past, cannot be re-written a thousand times. Imitators of Donne generally turn into Cowleys and Clevelands."[1] Strong beer, indeed. Although the names of Cleveland and Cowley no longer fall trippingly off the tongue, many will recall that few things more damning could be said about a poet's career and the perils of imitation.

You might be relieved to know, therefore, that my remarks will not be about James Wright, but about this man (fig. 1), and, in this picture at least, taken at nearly the same age, when both men were in their mid-forties, Donne's uncanny, latter-day look alike, Anthony Hecht (fig. 2). At the time of his death in 2004, Hecht was the author of many books of poetry and criticism spanning the second half of the twentieth century. His last single volume of poetry, *The Darkness and the Light*, appeared in 2002, and he is generally regarded as one of the most gifted of the so-

[1] *A Wild Perfection: The Selected Letters of James Wright*, ed. Anne Wright and Saundra Rose Maley, with Jonathan Blunk (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), p. 60.



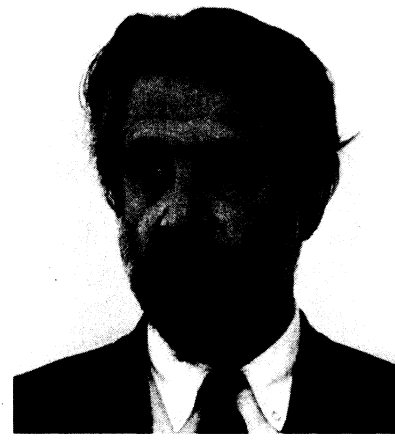


Fig. 1 (left). John Donne, after Isaac Oliver, 1616, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London. Fig. 2 (right). Anthony Hecht.

called formalist poets of his generation, a group that includes Hecht's immediate contemporaries Richard Wilbur (b. 1921), James Merrill (b. 1926), and John Hollander (b. 1929), all born in the 1920s.

But Wright's perspective forms a useful entry into the subject, in part because, like Hecht, he was among the aspiring poets who came to Kenyon College shortly after World War II to study with the legendary John Crowe Ransom; but also because, amid this denizen of "Donneans," Wright anticipated the particular dilemma of a Bloomian double belatedness facing poets of Wright's generation who were still, again like Hecht, greatly attracted by the properties of the "metaphysical lyric," but who no doubt wished to avoid the fate of a Cowley or a Cleveland and end up among those poets numbered, in Judith Scherer Herz's apt phrase, "under the sign of Donne."[2]

There is one other remark by Wright that I cannot resist quoting, bearing as it does on my subject and the paired images above. Critical of a certain kind of gangland-style reviewing, Wright noted in a 1958 letter: "From the point of view of either [reviewer under question] . . . it is impossible to see that, say, Anthony Hecht (who is supposed to be a perfect counterfeit, the very self and voice of the poet-in-the-gray-

[2]"Under the Sign of Donne," *Criticism* 43 (2001): 29–58.

flannel-suit piddling with words) has written, in a poem called "Christmas is Coming" (in his book *A Summoning of Stones*), an anti-war poem of really dreadful depth and power."[3] Neither would one guess from the elegant 1616 portrait of Donne that Donne was the author of some of the most explosive verse in the English language. Both poets were not just masters of the shocking image in poetry, in other words. They were also deliberate fashioners of their own civilized self-image and aware of discontinuities—psychological, ethical, and moral—that lurked under the surface and were ripe for exploitation in verse.

That Hecht was early on an admirer of Donne we know from later personal testimony as well as archival evidence from his youth. Included among his papers at Emory University is a four-stanza, carefully plotted lyric called "Donne's Wind and Mine." The typescript is dated "1943" when Hecht was a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Bard College, and since the poem is unlikely to be familiar to readers today, it deserves quoting in full:

> I shall adopt the torso of a ship,
> For the car and the cloud move in restricted realms;
> But I, alive on the tide's voluptuous lip,
> Suckled in storms,
> Send my mast reeling with a skyward reach,
> Settle my ribs in the riot of liquid forms,
> And set about my search.
>
> I leave the wealthy landscape of my birth,
> Where the seasons are welded together with featureless days,
> The grape goes limp, and the desolate peel of the earth
> Darkens and [dries].
> But I, in need of a sail, unfurl my lung,
> And capture the breath of the sky, which rushes to rise
> And spin in my rigging.
>
> Looking below, where idiot currents rage
> Through their coral asylums, I ride on the travelling swell,
> And laugh at the sleeping fish in his pliable cage.
> Pursuing the gull,

[3] *A Wild Perfection*, p. 81.

I scrawl my gargantuan wake on the face of the foam,
And into the fathoms of chaos under my hull,
Dig my keel down.

Skating the bald sea-surfaces, and hills
Of heaving ocean, through cliffs of tempestuous air,
I drive and plunge on the margin between two wills.
Letting the weather steer,
I ride and race with my friends that are feathered and finned,
Who see me sailing the gamut of flood and fear,
To find my miraculous wind.[4]

It should also be noted that Hecht introduces the poem with a thematically apposite epigraph from Donne's "Song" ("Go and catch a falling star"): "And finde / What winde / Serves to'advance an honest minde."[5] A poem then much in vogue, Eliot had recently purloined the line "Teach me to heare Mermaides singing" at the end of "Prufrock" ("I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. / I do not think that they will sing to me").[6] But Hecht's exuberant homage is not concerned with hearing mermaid's singing or with following out the amatory cynicism of Donne's poem—that will happen later, and famously, in poems like "The Dover Bitch." Rather, this early parallel venture with the muse is about his setting forth "to find my miraculous wind," as he develops the valedictory context characteristic of a number of Donne's poems, including, eerily and portentously, given the poem's 1943 date, Donne's "Hymn to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany." Nor is it just the valedictory situation transferred into a vocational calling that speaks to Hecht's interest in Donne. The young poet is also drawn to Donne's emphatically masculine persona: the often fantastically achieved

[4]

[5]"Song" ("Go and catch a falling star"), in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 90. All citations of Donne's poems are to this edition.

[6]Hecht's complicated response to Eliot is the subject of his late essay, "T.S. Eliot," *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 5 (2003): 3–17. The quotation from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is to the version of the poem in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 16.

authoritative flights of ego that earned Donne the title of "the monarch of wit," and which Hecht, launching himself into the beyond through the extended "conceit" of adopting "the torso of a ship," fancifully recreates with a surpassing touch of comic Rabelasian gusto: "I scrawl my gargantuan wake on the face of the foam, / And into the fathoms of chaos under my hull / Dig my keel down."

Seasoned readers of Hecht's verse will have little trouble spotting a few embryonic seeds here as well: "the intricate trelliswork of his stanzas," in J. D. McClatchy's words, "some of them feats of engineering not seen since the seventeenth century and the grandiloquent diction,"[7] in this case carried to a pointed extreme in the marked alliteration and, one must assume, appropriately billowy phrasing. So, too, the poem manifests Hecht's early concern with depicting a landscape of personal exile, even referring, at one point, to the figure of "the grape" going limp—an image that will be elaborately transformed and magnificently orchestrated in the dramatic monologue called "The Grapes" from *The Venetian Vespers* (1979). And as a threshold poem of sorts, "Donne's Wind and Mine" is of biographical interest for being probably among the last verses Hecht composed before being inducted into the army in 1943. The military campaign would take him through France and Czechoslovakia and eventually to the liberation of Flossenburg, the concentration camp annexed to Buchenwald, in which Hecht's knowledge of French and German would be put to use interviewing the often emaciated internees and, later, their captors. These events would ultimately supply him with some of his most haunting material, gradually shaped and released over a lifetime of writing in poems such as "Behold the Lilies of the Field" and "More Light! More Light!," dedicated to Heinrich Blücher and Hannah Arendt, in *The Hard Hours* (1968); in some of the horrific war scenes recollected in "The Venetian Vespers"; and in the memorable sestina, "The Book of Yolek," published in *The Transparent Man* (1990).

But Hecht also chose to let "Donne's Wind and Mine" remain uncollected, along with much other juvenilia. Cowley and Milton excepted, few poets actively seek to be publicly remembered by what they

---

[7]"Anatomies of Melancholy," in *The Burdens of Formality: Essays on the Poetry of Anthony Hecht*, ed. Sydney Lea (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 187.

wrote at twenty. So by way of making partial amends for this act of exhumation and in the interest of moving the Donnean story forward, let me offer another poem, "Swan Dive," written some thirty years later by an author manifestly in control of his medium.

Over a crisp regatta of lights, or a school
Of bobbling spoons, ovals of polished black
Kiss, link, and part, wriggle and ride in place
On the lilt and rippling slide of the waterback,
And glints go skittering in a down-wind race
On smooth librations of the swimming pool,

While overhead on the tensile jut and spring
Of the highest board, a saffroned diver toes
The sisal edge, rehearsing throughout his limbs
The flight of himself, from the arching glee to the close
Of wet, complete acceptance, when the world dims
To nothing at all in the ear's uproar and ring.

He backs away, and then, with a loping run
And leap of released ambition, lifts to a splendid
Realm of his own, a destined place in the air,
Where, in a wash of light, he floats suspended
Above the turquoise waters, the ravelled snare
Of snaking gold, the fractured, drunken sun,

And the squints of the foreshortened girls and boys
Below in a world of envies and desires,
Eying him rise on fonts of air to sheer
And shapely grace. His dream of himself requires
A flexed attention, emptiness, a clear
Uncumbered space and sleek Daedalian poise,

From which he bows his head with abrupt assent
And sails to a perfect sacrifice below—
To a scatter of flagstone shadows, a garbled flight
Of quavering anthelions, a slow
Tumult of haloes in green, cathedral light.
Behind him trails a bright dishevelment

Of rising carbuncles of air; he sees
Light spill across the undulant mercury film
Beyond which lies his breath. And now with a flutter
Of fountaining arms and into a final calm
He surfaces, clutching at the tiled gutter,
Where he rides limp and smilingly at ease.

But hoisting himself out, his weight returns
To normal, like sudden aging or weariness.
Tonight, full-length on a rumpled bed, alone,
He will redream it all: bathed in success
And sweat, he will achieve the chiseled stone
Of catatonia, for which his body yearns.[8]

"Swan Dive" first appeared in collected form in *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1977), and the poem's surfeit of sensuous images points immediately to the important place Yeats also occupied in Hecht's thinking (to say nothing about Shakespeare), an influence thematically represented in this and other Hecht poems by the continual lure of an escape into an artifice of eternity. But we might recall as well, in the diver's imagined arc, a remnant of the early Donne poem, in which the youthful persona, setting sail, seeks a lofty perspective on sublunary life around him and below. Both poems are, in their different ways, overtly Daedalian. But the later poem fully exhibits its control over a subject that earlier had eluded him. Indeed, it finds in the diver the particular attributes of practiced concentration, of "flexed attention," that set the performing artist apart from the world of others, and in this act of deliberate distancing reminds us as well of the important role Allen Tate played early on in Hecht's evolution as a poet.

Whether or not there is an explicit Donnean reminiscence in "Swan Dive," the lyric became the occasion for Hecht to speak at some length about the influence of Donne more generally on his poetry. Responding to an observation Philip Hoy made in 1999 about the significant presence of "discontinuities" in this poem and elsewhere in his verse, notable here in the shift in perspective in the final stanza, Hecht

[8]"Swan Dive" and, below, excerpts from "More Light! More Light!" and "Peripeteia" are from Anthony Hecht, *Collected Earlier Poems* (1997), reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

remarked that "discontinuities" were a factor in his poems "from the first," citing the example of "A Hill," the inaugural poem from *The Hard Hours*—and then traced the origins of this concept in his work not to any initially held belief about the "theoretical basis" of the lyric but to his early reading experiences. "Some of the poetry I first fell in love with was the work of John Donne, whose poems are filled with jostling paradox and ironic self-contradiction, and which were, moreover, highly dramatic, and such drama, however minimal, required something like oppositions and complexities that the 'lyric,' as I had heard it defined, very specifically lacked." "Donne's kind of poetry," he continued, "was more attractive, more exciting and interesting than some simple *cri du coeur*. But I guess I ought also to confess that I did not trust my own feelings enough to risk such a *cri du coeur*, and I sought protection in dramatic structures and irony."[9]

To some degree, this is the familiar language of New Criticism, finely distilled. But, it needs be emphasized, the terms are now put to a different purpose from what emerged in canonical accounts by the likes of Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), especially as these later works of criticism ossified into an orthodox defense of a poem's "unity," in which local ambiguities and antinomies could always, it seems, be resolved in a higher synthesis of some sort. Hecht's reading of Donne, or more accurately, his reflections on his early reading of Donne, point in the opposite direction, not to imminent or deferred resolutions, but to unveiling and exploring discontinuities as irreducible features of representing life. The shift in perspective at the end of "Swan Dive," for instance, is a quiet *tour de force*. After so many high flights of description, the last stanza suddenly emerges like the diver, in the most casual fashion, to remind us of the world of time—of the aging body, indeed of the impossibility of escaping the body's weight and, in emblem poem fashion, of the mortality that bodily weight signifies, in language suddenly as plain as day and, in its marked plainness, of great force or weight. The ending also opens up a vista into the psychic interior as well, in which we are invited to glimpse the narcissistic compulsion underlying the attempt at perfection as an escape from death.

---

[9] *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (1999; rev. 3rd ed. London: BTL, 2004), pp. 71–72.

With the emergence in the last stanza of the mortal body "full-length on a rumpled bed," we know we've left the airy effects of "Donne's Wind and Mine," and entered real Donne territory, and one direction this essay could take would be to begin to explore this common subject in some detail, in works whose titles alone resonate with possibilities: *The Hard Hours, The Venetian Vespers, Flight Among the Tombs, The Darkness and the Light,* even *The Transparent Man.* Such an excursion would attend to the jaunty wit found in lyrics like "Tarantula or the Dance of Death" and the more macabre satire accompanying the many impersonations of Death done in conjunction with Leonard Baskin's woodcuts; and ultimately it would pass on to explore the hallucinatory extremities of a Jacobean disgust with bodily decay associated with the city of Venice itself in the long dramatic monologue, "The Venetian Vespers." As Alicia Ostriker noted, some time ago, among Hecht's ancient fathers is Jeremiah, the author of *Lamentations*, a work Donne also translated, and there is much good old-fashioned outrage in both poets about human vanity, their own included.[10]

But I want to return to the matter of discontinuity that Hecht attributes to his early reading of Donne, in the context of the opening concerns expressed by Wright and implied in Herz's title. The first point is simply to say that Donne supplied the young poet with a way of thinking in poetry, that is, with a way of structuring thought, rather than with a list of Donnean topics, conceits, phrases, and so forth; and in this regard Hecht belongs not with the poets recently inventoried by Herz but with those poets, including W. H. Auden, described in an earlier essay by Josephine Miles, poets drawn to what Miles calls the "propositional structure" in Donne's verse: the propositions signaled by the strong use of the conjunctions "and," "but," and "yet," and which Miles describes as "not a balanced but a subordinating structure, not a weighing of alternatives and *either-or*, but an ebullient setting forth and then a check. . . . The propositional structure asserts life *but* the actuality of death, the power of spirit, *but* the power of body, the absurdities *but* the moderations of human existence."[11]

---

[10]"*Millions of Strange Shadows*: Anthony Hecht as Gentile and Jew," in *The Burdens of Formality*, p. 99.

[11]"Twentieth-Century Donne," in *Twentieth-Century Literature in Retrospect*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 218.

To move from the precise grammar of thinking represented in verse to something like achieved poetic vision, we might say that Donne helped to "open" up the young poet, in part by offering the example of speaking through a dramatic personae, as Hecht notes, but also because the kind of thinking Hecht valued in Donne required thinking in terms of change, indeed in terms of discontinuities, not just between the body and its soul-like aspirations in "Swan Dive," but of discontinuities and dissonances of an immediately personal and deeply historical kind, indeed as verified by personal experience and a long view of human history—the ruptures of thought and behavior, conspicuous for the first time in *The Hard Hours*. These ruptures include, for instance, the unnervingly casual shift of perspective in the fourth stanza of "More Light! More Light!": "We move now to outside a German wood." The opening stanzas had been set in sixteenth-century England when "sacrifice" is presented as still significant, however painful the suffering. (Hecht had read his Foxe, as Donne scholars will quickly recognize.[12]) But then the scene suddenly changes to post-Goethe, Nazi Germany—the poem's title alludes to what are reputed to be Goethe's last words—in which the banality of a bureaucratized evil, of much "casual death," drains the concept of sacrifice of every shred of human dignity.[13]

> No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
> When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
> The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.
> He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

---

[12]In a letter dated 11 June 1969, to Bill Read, Hecht noted that "the martyr" described in the first two stanzas is based on "no real person; the details are conflated from several executions, including Lattimer and Ridley whose deaths at the stake are described by Foxe in 'Acts and Monuments.' But neither of them wrote poems just before their deaths, as others did."

[13]Here is perhaps the place to note that, as soldier and poet, Hecht would probably agree with Joseph Brodsky's view that one appeal of metaphysical poetry more generally lay in its pursuit of instabilities: "Everything was shaken, faith in particular. Metaphysical poetry is the mirror of this disorder. This is why the poets of our century, people with war experience, found the metaphysical school so alluring." See Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey through the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), p. 149.

> No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
> Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
> Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
> And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

Pushed to their extreme, these discontinuities can lead in one direction to transformations of the most wondrous kind, such as find expression at the end of the appropriately named, "Peripeteia." There the bored, self-involved speaker, a latter-day Andrew Marvell with a special affection for cultivating the mind's "loneliness," suddenly wakens to the play he has been attending, a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and becomes magically transported out of his solitude into a new life, rich and strange, as

> Miraculous Miranda, steps from the stage,
> Moves up the aisle to my seat, where she stops,
> Smiles gently, seriously, and takes my hand
> And leads me out of the theatre, into a night
> As luminous as noon, more deeply real,
> Simply because of her hand, than any dream
> Shakespeare or I or anyone ever dreamed.

In the other direction, they involve reckoning the persistent ineradicable stain of human atrocities, epitomized in the extermination of the Jews at Flossenburg and Auschwitz, and suddenly surfacing to consciousness even in the "little shin-bones, hollow at the core," of house sparrows, in the poem of that title from *The Venetian Vespers*.

Not all Hecht's poetry lies at these outer edges of experience, it must be said, although the title of his final collection, *The Darkness and the Light*, reminds us of their enduring force in his poetry. And if the example of Donne helped Hecht to organize in verse what was discontinuous in life, I want to close by noting one further turn in this late twentieth-century tale of influence. In his reflections on the uses Donne afforded him as a young poet, Hecht noted his need for the protection of irony in part because he did not trust himself enough to give a *cri du coeur*. Hecht never became a poet of a single cry of the heart, but as his career progressed, the element of the autobiographical increased, often still wrapped in the manifestly artful guise of imagined

speakers, but substantial enough to assure us that the title, "Donne's Wind *and* Mine" (my italics), was indeed prophetic.

University of California at Los Angeles