

“Queer Light”: Hecht, Bishop and Bosch

by Gregory Dowling

The criticism of major poets often intrigues us for two reasons: for the light it throws on the subject they are discussing and the light it throws on their own works. This is certainly the case with Anthony Hecht, and, perhaps especially so in the case of his writings on Elizabeth Bishop. He wrote two essays on the poet; the first was a lengthy review of *Geography III*, which was collected in his book *Obbligati* (1986); the second, collected in *Melodies Unheard* (2003), is self-explanatorily entitled, "Two Poems by Elizabeth Bishop", and discusses "Wading at Wellfleet" and "The Man Moth". It is the latter essay that I wish to focus on, and particularly his engagement with "The Man-Moth"—and even more particularly the intriguing comparison he makes with a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. My aim is not only to explore the reasons for Hecht's fascination with the poem but also to see whether the comparison with Bosch throws a stronger light on Bishop's poem or on Hecht's concerns.

Hecht's first essay on Bishop points towards George Herbert, an influence acknowledged by Bishop herself; he draws attention to what seem to be religious preoccupations in her early poems, as in the imagery of the Eucharist in "Miracle at Breakfast" and the Epiphany of "Twelfth Morning". He defines the twelve poems of *Geography III* as "all utterances of a peculiar affirmative, one that takes into account all the griefs and terrors of existence" (128-9). The second essay is somewhat darker in tone, as is perhaps inevitable if we consider the two poems he has chosen to focus on. Herbert is still a point of reference, given the direct quotation Bishop makes from his poem "Affliction IV" in "Wading at Wellfleet", but the emphasis is on the "real affliction" rather than the sense of miraculous revelation that one might associate with Herbert.

The most strikingly original part of his analysis of "The Man-Moth" is undoubtedly the comparison he makes with Hieronymus Bosch's painting "Ascension to the Empireum", seeing in it a "pictorial analogue" to the Man-Moth's vision of the moon as "a hole at the top of the sky", and his dream that he could "push his small head through that round clean opening / and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light." Hecht tells us that "Bosch is the sort of painter who might appeal to poets, and particularly to Elizabeth Bishop, because the mystery and symbolism of so many of his paintings—presenting apocalyptic visions and embodiments of the Temptations of St. Anthony—are terrifying and distinctly nightmarish" (165). He goes on to say that this painting is "uncommonly benign", surmising that it was part of a set of paintings probably "commissioned by the Venetian Republic in behalf of the Doge".¹ He quotes the scholar Charles de Tolnay who said that "Bosch replaces the medieval Paradise and Hell, which were objective images of celestial and infernal hierarchies, with subjective visions that resemble the conceptions of the great mystics and exist only in the inner world of the soul" (167). It is clearly this sense of "subjective vision" that caught Hecht's attention on a visit to the Ducal Palace and which reminded him of Bishop's poem.

However, Hecht's remark on the appeal of Bosch to poets is peculiarly pertinent to himself. There are several passages in "Venetian Vespers", for example, which closely recall the nightmarish visions to be found in some of Bosch's apocalyptic works. The protagonist of that poem could almost be describing details from such paintings when, in the first section, he talks about "those first precocious hints of hell, / Those intuitions of living desolation / That last a lifetime", dwelling on such images as:

a scaled, crusted animal whose head
Fits in a Nazi helmet, whose webbed feet
Are cold on the white flanks of dreaming lovers,
While thorned and furry legs embrace each other
As black mandibles tick (42)

Hecht's essay, like so much of his criticism, reveals an intensely personal response to the poem. His reading is essentially a psychological one, and he is not afraid to make direct connections with Bishop's own life, interpreting the poem as an allegory of the workings of the unconscious—in particular, the emergence of unconscious fears, such as those that stemmed from her own mother's madness. However, it is striking that much of what Hecht writes of Bishop's fears and obsessions is applicable to his own case—or, at least, to his own poetry.

He concludes his essay with a brief reference to "The Sandpiper". Like other critics he sees a touch of the ironic self-portrait in Bishop's description of this bird, which lives in "a state of controlled panic". What is especially interesting is the way he describes this autobiographical element: after quoting the line that depict the bird's obsession in "looking for something, something, something", Hecht declares:

That is, first of all, the beginning of fidelity to a visible aspect of experience that, Blake assures us, could reveal a whole world. It is a fidelity to artistic practice as well, threatened by regular seismographic shocks that need deliberately to be ignored. Indeed, such conscious, active "ignoring" is nothing less than a strategy to maintain sanity in a world of constant upheaval. [...] Whatever else it may be, acute attention to the visible world is more or less by definition a constant obsession with the *present tense*, a purposeful disregard of past and future. (171)

Here a reader of Hecht's poetry is bound to be reminded of a famous passage in "The Venetian Vespers". After a superb description of a storm in the city the protagonist states:

To give one's whole attention to such a sight
is a sort of blessedness. No room is left
For antecedence, inference, nuance.
One escapes from all the anguish of this world
Into the refuge of the present tense.
The past is mercifully dissolved, and in
Easy obedience to the gospel's word,
One takes no thought whatever of tomorrow
The soul being drenched in fine particulars. (57)

Once one's attention has been drawn to such echoes it is not hard to come across other examples. At the very end of Hecht's poem the protagonist says bleakly: "I look and look, / As though I could be saved simply by looking" (65). It is not too imaginative, I feel, to hear a recollection of the final cryptic line of Bishop's poem, "Over 2,000 illustrations and a Complete Concordance": "—and looked and looked our infant sight away" (59).

There are undoubtedly strong personal reasons why Hecht felt such a close sense of identity with Bishop, but it is worth noting that he was far from being the only poet to feel this. Ashbery memorably described her as a "poet's poet's poet", and many have noticed the

unique way in which she seems to appeal to poets of all schools and all tendencies. This phenomenon was perhaps best summed up by William Meredith, who declared: "She will yet civilize and beguile us from our silly schools. The Olsons will lie down with the Wilburs and the Diane Wakoskis dance quadrilles with the J.V. Cunninghams and the Tooth Mother will suckle the rhymed skunk kittens of Lowell..." (Schwartz-Estess, 218). The ecumenical appeal of her poetry is one of its most fascinating qualities; many have attempted to pin it down, offering explanations that range from her refusal to raise her voice to her undemonstrative dexterity at both form and free verse. The fact that such explanations are never fully satisfactory only makes the study of her influence and of her relations with other poets all the more intriguing.

It is worth saying that Hecht's essay is not only interesting for what it reveals of himself; it does provide a certain insight into the poem's peculiar qualities. The comparison with the Bosch painting is especially illuminating. Although it is unlikely that Bishop was familiar with the painting (and it is not Hecht's intention to claim that she was), by drawing our attention to the curious similarities in the two visionary worlds, Hecht opens our eyes to the oneiric qualities of Bishop's poem. Critics have compared the hallucinatory scene of Bosch's painting with the visions described by people who have emerged from a state of coma, and this sense of a world poised between disturbing dream and equally unsettling waking is also true of the poem.

Bishop herself made some specific comments on the poem which testify to its sources in dreams. In addition to remarking on the famous misprint ("man-moth" for mammoth", footnoted in the poem), Bishop referred to a dream of her friend Margaret Miller, in which she "had looked into the inside of a small mask someone had pulled from his face, and caught in it all around the eyeholes were the little hairy eyelashes" (Kalstone 19). She remembered this dream when observing one day "a woman in the subway about whom everything had died [...] except the eyelashes." The woman's face, she said, made her think of Miller's dream: "its expression was a concave one, like an empty interior expression, and its only markings were the little eyelashes" (Kalstone 19).

The idea of a "concave expression"—like the interior of a mask—is especially intriguing and it provides a clue to the peculiarly perturbing atmosphere that characterizes the poem. The poem gives us a world of mysterious oneiric inversions—from the "inverted pin" that is Man in this poem to the notion of the moon as "a small hole at the top of the sky". There are also reversions, like the Man-Moth who "always seats himself facing the wrong way."

These inversions or reversions have their effect on the structure of the poem, which is divided into two halves:

"[h]ere, above" and "the pale subways of cement he calls his home"—just as the Bosch painting has its negative counterpart in the image of hell. Although the overall effect is not of strident or glaring opposition between the two worlds—it is not a question of light versus dark—the poem plays suggestively with images of reversion or contrast, hinting at the notion of the photographic negative; this is partly intimated in the simile that likens the Man-Moth's shadow to a "photographer's cloth" that he drags behind himself. We are thus subliminally prepared to see the image of the Man-Moth's eye—"all dark pupil"—as a negative image of that earlier hole at the top of the sky.

And this is another way in which the Bosch poem resonates interestingly with the poem, as Hecht points out; he shows how the notion of the moon as a hole "will have its analogues in

this poem in the subway tunnels in the second half of the poem” (167). As I say, these contrastive connections are not explicit; they are hinted at, perhaps at a subconscious level. And, of course, according to Hecht, it is precisely the subconscious that the poem is all about.

Hecht's reading of the poem at times verges on the schematically allegorical, as when he points to the contrast between the fearful but daring climber, the Man-Moth, and the illusionless and hence earthbound Man. It is an undeniably suggestive reading but does not fully explain the poem's peculiar fascination. Its power partly lies in the way it resists excessive schematizing; this applies in particular to the image of the tear at the end of the poem (of which more in a moment).

No amount of allegorical explanation can remove the sense of strangeness from our experience of the poem; it is certainly much stranger than most of Bishop's poems. In it she creates a very weird world, a haunting mixture of the subterranean, the crepuscular and the lunar. The idea that this poem summons up a specific world is one that was memorably expressed by another great poet, who was especially close to (and influenced by) Bishop—Robert Lowell. He remarked: "In Elizabeth's Man-Moth a whole new world is gotten out and you don't know what will come after any one line. It's exploring. And it's as original as Kafka. She's gotten a world, not just a way of writing. She seldom writes a poem that doesn't have that exploratory quality" (Schwartz-Estess 197).

Lowell's observation, with its shrewd nod to Kafka, points to a way in which this poem, although so apparently different from all her other works, can help to illuminate them. One could say that the strangeness of this poem actually consists in the way she has here taken to extremes a quality that characterizes all of her best poetry—and this quality can most helpfully be analyzed, as Lowell hints by his use of the adjective “exploratory”, by drawing on her own geographical terminology. For what is distinctive in Bishop's work is the way in which each poem confronts the reader with an apparently unique and complete world, possessing its own peculiar atmosphere, its own palette of colors, its own mood, climate and even individual ecosystem.

It is not just a matter of the norths and souths, the cold springs, electrical storms and rainy seasons of her book-and poem-titles. There are also the wonderfully varied effects she obtains with imagery of scintillance against gloomy or vapory backgrounds: think of the blue-grays and the cold silvery iridescence of "At the Fish Houses"; the subdued misty browns and pewter-colors, leads and silvers with occasional glints of "Twelfth Morning"; the slimy stinking rural world of "The Prodigal" with its compensatory blazing puddles, forked lightnings and lantern-created aureoles; the "lovely hell-green flames" of moss attacking the "gray moonbursts" of lichen in "Brazil, January 1st 1502". (And one could go on...)

In "Man-Moth" we have a world of moonlight and pale subways—and, to especially disturbing effect, of shifting perspectives: we move, as already seen, from "here above" to "the pale subways of cement he calls his home". The reader, like the Man-Moth, has the sense that he or she is "facing the wrong way". The last stanza, the most mysterious and disturbing, brings about the greatest of such shifts. Unexpectedly a "you" is introduced into the poem, complete with flashlight, probing the Man-Moth's eye (he has just one apparently):

It's all dark pupil,
Entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
As he stares back, and closes up the eye.

These lines are clearly inspired by Margaret Miller's dream. The image of the "haired horizon" is decidedly perturbing, partly because it contributes to the dizzying effect of a switch in focus; here we move from the outside viewer ("you") probing the Man-Moth's eye to the viewpoint of the eye itself, and with the image of a "tightening" horizon, we are given the sense that the eye is somehow connected with the earlier claustrophobic image of the tunnel.

These lines lead directly into the concluding lines on the tear. It is hardly necessary to gloss all the possible meanings suggested by this image. Hecht makes the connection with the notion of "the Pierian spring, the source of inspiration, the refreshment of the Muses themselves"—while still reminding us that "it is, nevertheless, a tear, and therefore suggests sorrow as the source of the poet's art". However, what is most striking in the image is the concentrated force of its suggestive power, rather than any specific allegorical meaning we might attribute to it. There is something metaphysical about the wit here; one is reminded of Marvell's poem "The Drop of Dew", in which the drop is brilliantly described as "its own tear". In Bishop's poem the tear seems similarly fused with the eye, of which it is the product. The image is taken up in a later poem of Bishop's, the fourth of the "Songs for a Colored Singer":

Is it dew or is it tears,
dew or tears,
hanging there for years and years
like a heavy dew of tears?

As Hecht suggests, such tears are both mournful and poetically regenerative, and so anticipate the almanac's instruction in her poem "Sestina": "Time to plant tears."

In conclusion, Hecht's evocation of Bosch, while perhaps more revelatory of his own inclinations, does open our eyes to a certain quality that is always to be found in Bishop's works. While she is not an especially Boschian poet—she is not usually so extreme or so deliberately strange as the comparison would suggest—it is worth remembering that the surreal element is always present in her works. In "The Man-Moth" this quality is perhaps most clearly evident; for this very reason it is perhaps not one of her greatest poems. She works more successfully and more suggestively when the strangeness is not so much on the surface; however, a study of the peculiarly striking effects in this poem can help us to understand the way she achieves some of her subtler effects in her more mature works.

The disconcerting shift in perspective mentioned above is a device employed in many of her greater poems. In "Twelfth Morning" we find the lines: "He's bigger than the house. The force of / personality or is perspective dozing?" This dazed question seems to hover behind many of her poems. In some cases ("Sleeping on the Ceiling" or "Twelve O'Clock News") it is a matter of a deliberately eccentric point of view. In others the effect is achieved by more equivocal, even surreptitious procedures; for example, there is the way that her epiphanies emerge through mist, sometimes gradually (as in "The Moose") and sometimes with startling suddenness (as in "The Sandpiper").

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear.

In her poem "At the Fishhouses", she achieves the marvelous paradox of leaving us with the sense of a world that is steeped simultaneously in total mystery and in total clarity. "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear."

What in the end is most powerful in her poetry is her ability to create unforgettable images that never cease to resonate, even when their precise significance is not fully clear to us. And a close study of the images in any one of her poems—such as Hecht carried out with "The Man-Moth"—will usually lead the reader towards revealing comparisons and connections with images in other poems of hers. For example, while preparing this paper I naturally found myself pondering on those lines that first set Hecht thinking of Bosch and his painting of "The Ascension to the Empireum":

he climbs fearfully thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.

It is a wonderfully disquieting and suggestive image, and as I racked my brains trying to get an allegorical meaning out of it, I realized I was engaged in precisely the arduous activity that the image itself describes—trying to squeeze out my own black scrolls of significance. The sense that the poem was somehow mocking my own solemn attempts at elucubration was enough to make me "fall back scared" like the Man-Moth. And once I had ceased to pummel my brains I found myself recalling, quite unprompted, an image from her poem about a painting, with the laconic title "Poem": "Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow, / fresh squiggled from the tube."

I cannot say that this curious connection necessarily clarifies "The Man-Moth"—nor that "The Man-Moth" significantly clarifies "Poem". However, it does point towards the rewarding way that her poems continually talk to each other—and also towards the way her poems talk, more resonantly and more fruitfully than is the case with any other modern poet, with the works of a remarkable number of other major poets.

Works Cited

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1 Hecht was wrong in this assumption; the painting in fact was part of the collection of Cardinal Grimani; now that the Cardinal's palace has been opened as a museum, the painting together with the other works in the set is on display there. A reproduction of the painting can be seen at this address: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/...>