
When I see a Holocaust poem which is rhymed and/or metered, I am reminded of an anecdote about the Polish fiction writer and poet, Tadeusz Borowski. When he was first arrested by the Nazis, he was detained in a holding cell in nearly perfect isolation and without pen or paper to write. In order to pass the time, Borowski composed poems in his head, counting off the meter by pacing back and forth in his small cell. Isn’t this the classic image of the poet using his art to combat adversity? I am hesitant to turn it into an academic exercise, but there is something critically inviting about that detail of his composing metered?that is, regulated and controlled?verse to combat his external lack of control and the chaos his world had become.

There is an immediate conclusion one might come to. The poet creates some semblance of order in a world which no longer does. That is likely a part of the impetus (conscious or unconscious) to write formalist verse in the face of chaos, whether it is the chaos of genocidal violence or that other, more common, human chaos. Even though Anthony Hecht did not suffer detainment at the hand of the Nazis as Borowski did, his poems ?More Light! More Light!? and ?The Book of Yolek? raise similar questions about the ordering of human chaos with poetic form, as well as certain other questions about the aestheticization of the Holocaust.

Let’s look first at ?The Book of Yolek.? The sestina is a famously difficult form, often considered the most difficult, especially when one adds, as Hecht has here, the further constraint of meter. It is also often considered a showy form, one that is used to prove a poet’s mastery more than anything else. I would argue, however, that in this context, the rhetorical effect is quite different. The sestina’s reputation of showiness is precisely due to how difficult it is to write even a passable one. And again, Hecht adds meter to his versifying burden, thus making his effort all the more difficult. Here, the effort strikes me as respectful, almost as if Hecht is suggesting that writing about such material should not be easy?not in terms of content, of course, but also not at the level of form.

The poem also refuses the neatness form can give a subject matter, almost as if Hecht is additionally suggesting that while it should be difficult, it should not be clean and overly organized; not contained and utterly understood. For example, in stanza 6, line 4, we get an anapest, an iamb, an anapest, a trochee, and an iamb. So, of the five feet, only two are iambs, meaning a majority of the line is not strict iambic pentameter (though it is pentametric, so it still attains the aforementioned ordering effect to a certain degree). This is set in notable opposition to the opening line of the poem, which neatly has five iambs. There are only a few other strictly iambic lines in the poem. One worth noting is the first line of stanza three??The fifth of August, 1942.? Is Hecht mirroring the precision of the date with the precision of his meter? I would argue that, at least in part, this mirroring of form and information is the effect we should see in the line.

?More Light! More Light!? is written in a less demanding poetic form, rhymed quatrains, but many of the same concerns obtain in this poem as do in the more formally complex ?The
Book of Yolek. Hecht, widely admired as a virtuoso of form, purposely "messes up" his meter in both of these poems (and, given the many perfectly metered poems Hecht has published, it would be almost insulting to think this were mere error on his part). Writing about the Holocaust should be difficult, and damned difficult, he seems to be saying, but we must not delude ourselves that any perfect rendering of this material is possible. Also, I'd argue, this disruption of perfect meter is purposefully done in order to avoid putting a too perfect aesthetic veneer on such material.

Moving away from issues of form to issues of content, "More Light! More Light!" (supposedly Goethe's dying words) is a title that invites multiple readings. Hecht is perhaps being ironic by using the dying phrase of the greatest German literary figure in a poem about the greatest German atrocity. Goethe was famously an avid humanist, an accomplished scientist, and a masterful writer. We could therefore see a dark irony in how far the German people had fallen from its ideal man, Goethe, to its most heinous man, Hitler. Another possible reading of the title is that it is an indictment of Goethe's Enlightenment thought. Many consider Enlightenment thinking as the progenitor of the Holocaust, and so the irony of quoting Goethe would be quite different here. It's not that Germany (or Europe) fell from some lofty height, but rather that the barbarism of the Nazis was always-already present in the humanitarian Reason of the Enlightenment. Yet one more useful reading is worth considering: Perhaps one of the poem's messages is that Enlightenment humanism died with the Holocaust, just as Goethe died, and that the call for more light is in vain, as it was for Goethe. I am not concerned here with endorsing any of the above possible readings, but rather offer them as productive possibilities for reading the poem.

In closing, I want to return to my earlier point about the effort to battle chaos with artistic form. This makes immediate sense in the case of someone who experienced the Holocaust (or some other trauma), but in what ways is the rhetorical-aesthetic stance of someone who did not experience the Holocaust different in respect to form? Is it the subject matter that demands we try to re-order the universe, or is it the experience that demands it? Do both require it, but in different ways and with different ethical concerns? We could doubtless offer several answers to these questions, but no matter how we answer them, I maintain that they are among the questions that must be considered in regard to formal poetry and the representation of trauma.

Publication Status:
Original Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:
Anthony Hecht [2]

Review Process:
Single Review

Author:
Okla Elliott [3]

Poem:

Source URL: http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/measured-chaos-form-anthony-hecht%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cmore-light-more-light%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9C-book-yolek%E2%80%9D

Links