

Notes for Students: “RITES AND CEREMONIES”

Section I: “THE ROOM”

Stanza 1: Note the rhyme pattern of this first stanza.

Adonoi: Hebrew for “Lord”; a holy word, used only in prayer.

Three states—of being: God’s name is an anagram of “I was, I am, I will be”

the ram’s horn: the shofar, blown in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and the Day of Atonement

*Furnisher, hinger of heaven, who bound
the lovely Pleiades*

entered the perfect treasuries of the snow: In *Job* 38 God answers the suffering Job out of the

whirlwind by asking whether God’s power belongs also to man. (Notice, as you read,

Hecht’s revisions that make the lines even more beautiful, and Hecht’s turning God’s rhetorical questions to Job into the assertions of the speaker.) It is to this degree of faith and acceptance that the poem will return—but the journey is hard. The verses from *Job* quoted below appear either in this portion of section one or in section four, where they are referred to as “the famous ancient questions.”

Who has entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail? (38:22)

Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? (38:25–27)

Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? (38:28)

Who can bind the Pleiades or loosen Orion’s belt? (38:31)

fashioned me air: “air” is the direct object and “me” the indirect object of the verb “fashioned,”

(fashioned air for me) rather than a predicate nominative (fashioned me into air), which would make no sense and ignore the infinitive “to sing.”

Emmanuel: In Hebrew, *imanu* = “with us”; (k)El = “God”; the prophet Isaiah tells King Hezekiah of Judah that it was prophesied to Hezekiah’s father, King Ahaz of Judah, that Ahaz would have a son and if Hezekiah, that son, holds fast and does not join the rebellion against the Assyrian overlords, Hezekiah and his people will survive—“God [will be] with us.” Hezekiah does not heed the prophecy, joins a rebellion against the Assyrians, and suffers defeat. Seven centuries later, in the time of the Gospels, Isaiah’s prophecy is reinterpreted to announce the coming of Jesus as “God with us.”

“*Gott mit uns*”: “God with us” in German. We expect, of course, the translation to be from

Hebrew to English. Notice the somewhat chilling effect of the introduction of German here.

Stanzas 2–6: Note the rhyme pattern of these five stanzas.

their: the corpses of young German soldiers, left unburied by the Germans for the Allied soldiers

to see. Hecht was part of the division responsible for the liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Flossenbürg.

on their belts: German army belt buckles bore an Iron Cross and the words *Gott mit uns*.
the sign of the child: The “child” is now not Hezekiah but Jesus whose “sign” is the cross.

An Iron Cross: a German military insignia and medal, adopted by the Nazis.

And some there be that have no memorial,

That are perished as though they had never been: Verse 9 of “Let us now praise famous men,” from

the 2nd century B.C. book called *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Ben Sirach*—not part of the Hebrew Bible but included in the *Septuagint*. It begins, “Let us now praise famous men,” and continues, eight verses later:

8 There be of them that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.

9 *And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.*

10 But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

11 With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant.

12 Their seed standeth fast, and their children for their sakes.

13 Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.

14 Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore.

15 The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will shew forth their praise.

Hecht quotes verse 9 and omits the promise of verses 10–15. Instead of “hath not been forgotten,” their living on through “their seed,” and the burial of their bodies “in peace,” his next line is “Made into soap.”

“The Singing Horses of Buchenwald”: Buchenwald, one of the largest of Nazi concentration

camps, was located outside the German city of Weimar in a beech forest (“buchen” = beech tree, “wald” = forest). The “Singing Horses” is the name mockingly given by the Nazi torturers to Jewish prisoners who were stripped and forced, like horses, to drag cartloads of stone while singing for the entertainment of their guards. The command to “sing” is hardly original to the Germans. See verse 3 of Psalm 137, below. “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,” is a psalm of Jewish exile; Hecht refers to it again when he addresses Du Bellay in part three.

1 *By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept* when we remembered Zion.

2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3 *for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy;*

4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?

5 *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning,*

6 May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”

8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you according to what you have done to us.

9 Happy is he who seizes *your* infants and dashes *them* against the rocks
[as Jewish infants were seized and dashed against the rocks by the Babylonian captors and, 2,500 years later, by the Germans.]

whispered the Pope: Pious XII (Eugenio Pacelli) was Pope from 1939 to 1958. He has been accused of

failing to speak out against the Nazis. In 2009, amid continuing controversy, Pope Benedict XVI began the process to canonize Pious XII as a Catholic saint.

Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German writer and poet, lived and worked in Weimar, and kept a cabin in the beechwood forest just outside the city. There, one evening, struck by the peace of the place, he is said to have composed “The Wanderer’s Nightsong II,” considered by many to be the finest lyric in the German language. Consider the use to which that beech forest was put, the screams and cries that echoed through those woods from torture and medical experiment, and the irony of the reference becomes clear.

Über allen Gipfeln	Over all the hilltops
Ist Ruh,	is calm.
In allen Wipfeln	In all the treetops
Spürest du	you feel
Kaum einen Hauch;	hardly a breath of air.
Die Vögelein schweigen in Walde.	The little birds fall silent in the woods.
Warte nur, balde	Just wait, soon
Ruhest du auch.	you’ll also be at rest.

the little children were suffered to come along, too: Hecht’s line echoes the words of Jesus in the

Gospel of Matthew (19:14)—“suffer [allow] the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven,” as if the inclusion of children in transports and death camps was a privilege. With an obvious pun on “suffer.”

I am there: Judaism says that every generation is, in some sense, present anew at Sinai to receive the law, in Egypt when led out by God’s miracles, at the destruction of the Temple on the ninth of the month of Av; so, too, is Hecht “there” in the camps, both as actual witness and as imaginative witness, as are all Jews.

the strange room: This second reference is to those rooms in the camps into which prisoners were

driven, gassed with Zyklon B through the ceiling vents; their corpses were then transferred to the crematoria for burning.

“I cried unto the Lord God with my voice, /And He has heard me out His holy hill.”:
from Psalm 3, in

which David begs for God's protection from Absalom. In this reference resides what appears as a theological paradox. Those in the death chambers rooms are not "heard," at least not apparently, yet these words suggest they are.

Section II: "THE FIRE SERMON"

The title, The Fire Sermon: This section of the poem describes the burning of the Jews of Strasbourg in 1349, but its title is also an ironic allusion to section three of T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem called *The Wasteland*, in which Eliot inveighs against the tawdriness of modern life, casual sex, and bad taste, in part through by juxtaposing contemporary scenes against emblems of cultural and religious profundity, such as *The Confessions* of St. Augustine ("To Carthage then I came . . . O Lord Thou pluckest me out /O Lord Thou pluckest") and the Buddha's Fire Sermon ("Burning burning burning burning . . . burning").

In the final stanza of the last section of *The Wasteland* Eliot makes another reference to fire, this one a quote from the end of Canto 26 of Dante's *Purgatorio*. After Dante converses with the soul of the troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel, Daniel "Then hid himself in the fire that refines them [those in Purgatory]"—*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*. The fires that Hecht speaks of are not purgative and neither purify nor refine; they are real and they torture.

Hecht is alive to the great moral distance between his concerns and Eliot's, a distance which Hecht's use of the subtitle, "The Fire Sermon," emphasizes. Within that section of *The Wasteland* Eliot also alludes to Psalm 137 (see above), altering "By the waters of Bablyon" to "By the waters of Leman [Lake Geneva] I sat down and wept . . ." and therein turning its significance for Jews as an emblem of great suffering and exile into a metaphor for the trivial cultural ennui of the aesthete.

Note the absence of rhyme in the first ten stanzas of section two.

small paw tracks: the tracks of foxes, who carry bubonic plague

the foxtrot: literally, the footprints of foxes; figuratively, a popular mid-20th century dance step

"our sea": the Roman term (*mare nostrum*) for the Mediterranean, adopted centuries later by

Mussolini, confident of victory over the Allied powers.

the king of Tharsis . . . about seven thousand of them: from a contemporary (1348) account of the

black death, by Henry Knighton, canon at the abbey of St. Mary of the Meadows, Leicester. Knighton is also the source of the description of "a great mortality of sheep" about ten lines later.

Avignon: a city in southern France, from 1308–1379 the seat of the papacy.

the dancing-master: the fox

Friars Minor . . . Friars Preachers: Franciscans and Dominicans

Notice the evolving use of "judgment" from "Was it a judgment?" to "How could it be a judgment?" to "And presently it was found to be /Not a judgment."

Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
 Deferre no time;
 That so thy favours granting my request,
 They and my minde may chime.
 And mend my ryme.

The river worms through: A pun, perhaps. Worms is a city in Germany, and was home to Jews for

many centuries. Great scholars such as Rashi and the Maharil lived and studied there. In 1096 crusaders and the local mob murdered 800 of the Jews of Worms; on Kristallnacht in November of 1938 the Rashi synagogue was destroyed. Although Hecht could not have known this at the time of writing, the reconstructed synagogue was firebombed in 2010.

Whom thou shalt pluck: echoing “O Lord Thou pluckest me out” from T. S. Eliot (see above, under

The title: The Fire Sermon). St Augustine’s fire is metaphoric.

Section III: “THE DREAM”

The title: The Dream: a translation of the French word “*Songe*” (dream or vision), itself the title of

a 15-sonnet sequence composed in the 1550’s during an extended stay in Rome by the French Renaissance poet, Joachim Du Bellay. The sonnets describe Rome through the medium of ancient mythology and allegory. The title takes on ironic significance in that Du Bellay ignores what is directly before him, the corso of Carnival, which this section describes, in favor of dream images. Hecht may be calling into question the function and value of poetry itself, his own included, in the face of the tragic suffering.

St. Lucy, St. Cecilia, St. Lawrence: Three martyrs of the Church to whose suffering Hecht alludes:

St. Lucy, whose eyes, according to some legends, were gouged out; St. Cecilia, patron saint of music, who was tortured with hot steam—Hecht here makes a bitter pun on “pipes”; and St. Lawrence, who was burnt slowly on a grill above an open fire. Christian saints, by tradition, go to martyrdom with joy and “gentle serenity.”

Carnival: the period preceding the penitential season of Lent in the Christian calendar, lasting for

the seven weeks before Easter. During Lent one gives up the eating of meat; hence, the days before Lent are called *carne-vale* (“meat-farewell”), a celebratory last fling, as it were.

Corso: the main thoroughfare of Rome.

Du Bellay: see above.

Anjou: Du Bellay’s home in France.

harlequins and columbines: costumed revelers, dressed as figures from the *Commedia dell’Arte*, in

- patch.
- dolces*: Italian for “sweets.”
- Anointed Folly . . . Misrule*: For Carnival, a lowly person is anointed king and dresses as a Fool.
- The Jester or Fool’s costume, with its cap and bells, its “scepter” and its patchwork of fine fabrics, is designed to mimic the king’s attire.
- gantlet*: A gantlet is a course which men or beasts run, with spectators lined up on both sides to strike, beat, and whip the runners as they pass.
- Christ’s Vicar*: The Pope. “Vicar” here means “the earthly representative of.” Note the shift in stanza seven of this sequence to direct address by the speaker to Du Bellay.
- they too*: The Jews forced to run the course are exiles—from Jerusalem, exiled after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C. and again, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.—as Du Bellay is, from France.
- “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, . . .”*: The psalm of exile and longing for Jerusalem. Quoted above, under “*The Singing Horses of Buchenwald.*”
- Piranesian*: Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), an Italian artist famous for exquisite etchings of the ruins of ancient Rome. Although living two centuries after Du Bellay, Piranesi seems to Hecht to possess an aesthetic sensibility and architectural focus similar to Du Bellay’s.
- elegiac woes*: woes that remain in the realm of the aesthetic, and that find expression in the ancient poetic form of elegy; a grieving, in Du Bellay’s case, for the loss of Rome’s ancient beauty, a rarified sensibility detached from the concerns of the world in which the artist lives.
- declensions*: not the grammatical term, although perhaps playing upon that; rather, “decline.”

Section IV: “WORDS FOR THE DAY OF ATONEMENT”

The title: “*Words for the Day of Atonement*”: in Hebrew this day is called “*Yom Kippur*.”

- Whom is the speaker addressing in these opening lines?
- himself*: the antecedent of this singular pronoun is “the wicked” in the preceding line, which we at first take to be a collective substantive.
- the winter wind*: Note the large number of references to both “winter” and “wind” in this poem.
- again*: When else did Jews “wander the wilderness”?
- the Lord of hosts*: a frequent appellation of God in Jewish prayer.
- remnant*: This word refers to those Jews who have survived, *that is to say*, to all living Jews at any

one time, since so many thousands have, throughout time, been slaughtered.
Sodom and Gomorrah: ancient cities of the plain of Jordan, destroyed utterly by fire from heaven;
 erased.

And to what purpose: an elliptical phrase; what is omitted is “have we survived.”

This wilderness of comfort: a comment about modern life.

"None does offend . . .": King Lear's words (IV. vi.164).

The soul is thine . . . though they be very great: These ten lines, with their powerful and lovely

repetitions, begin the morning “Selichos” (“forgiveness”) service in the weeks preceding

Yom Kippur. They are sung aloud by the person leading the service.

It is winter as I write . . .: To what book of the Bible does Hecht return in these stanzas? What,

besides the rhetorical questions that God puts to Job, are the “ancient questions” and concerns of that book?

Forgiven be . . .: These lines immediately follow the recitation of Kol Nidre (“all vows”) in the

evening prayer service that begins the Day of Atonement. It is recited three times by the cantor and then three times by the congregation.

the promised third: While this phrase can refer to the third Temple, described in *Ezekiel* 40 as a

vision of Ezekiel's on Yom Kippur, it seems to be a grammatical appositive, modifying “remnant.” Six million Jews, roughly one-third of the Jewish people, died in the holocaust, but whether that is in some way Hecht's reference is unclear.

“He shall come down like rain upon mown grass”: from Psalm 72, in which David prays that his son

Solomon may carry on the work God has assigned David—to bring about on earth a reign of peace, justice, and mercy. The “he” is Solomon or the Messianic descendent of Solomon and David. The poem ends with the hope and promise of God's mercy, to be brought into being not by God but by man.