

# **SEXUAL IMAGERY AND MORALITY IN THE WORKS OF ANTHONY HECHT**

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Jacob Moose

# WHO IS ANTHONY HECHT?

- Born January 16, 1923 (Manhattan, NY)
  - Grew up in a Small Jewish Family
  - Upper-Middle Class/Upper Class
- 1940 – 1943: Bard College
  - Interrupted by World War II
- 1943 – 1946: Enlists to serve in WWII
  - U.S. Army Infantry
  - European Front (1945)
  - Japan (1946)
  - Discharged March 12, 1946
- 1946 – 1950: Continues education
- 1951-1993: University Career as Professor/Poet/Critic
- Dies October 20, 2004 (Washington, D.C.)



Anthony Hecht, 1947

# HORRORS OF WORLD WAR II: LIBERATION OF FLOSSENBÜRG (1945)

"Flossenbürg was an annex of Buchenwald. It was both an extermination camp and a slave-labour camp. [...] Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus. [...] The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking."

*(Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy 26)*

# WAR & HOLOCAUST POETRY

- “More Light! More Light!”(from *The Hard Hours*)
  - One of his most anthologized poems
- Other Notable War Poems:
  - “The Book of Yolek”
  - “An Overview
  - “Still Life”
  - Rites and Ceremonies

## THE HARD HOURS

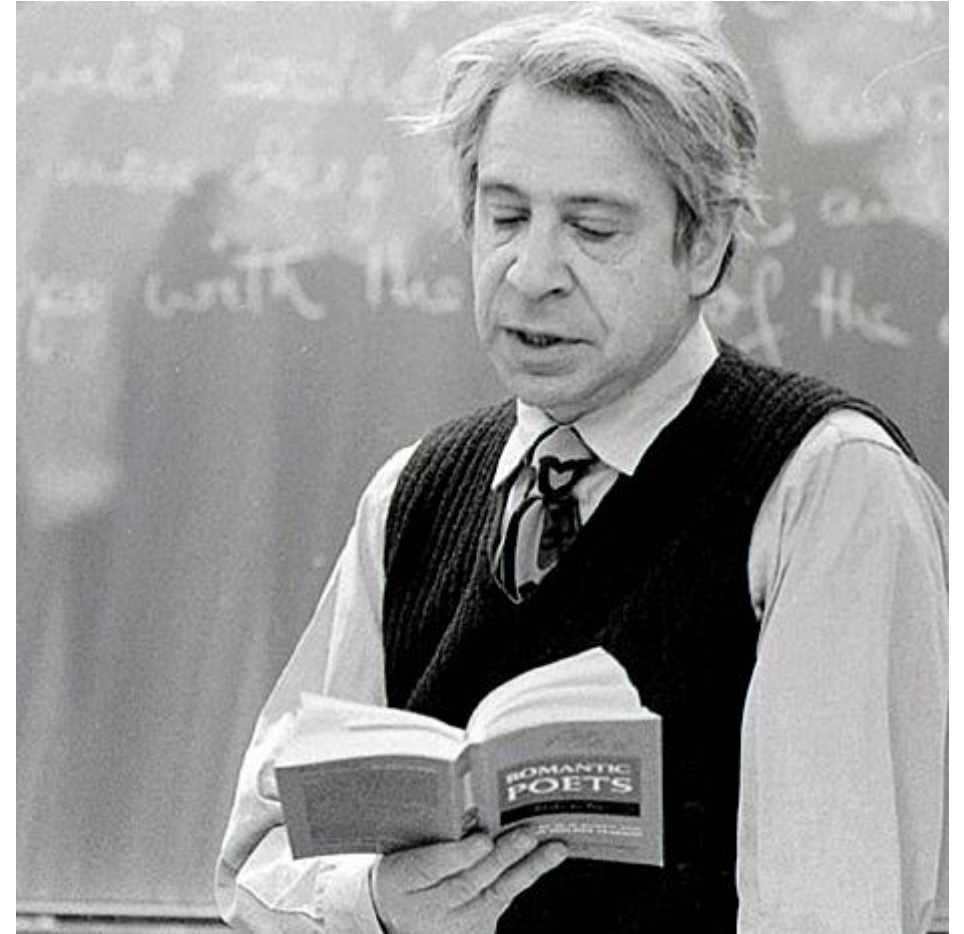
POEMS BY

ANTHONY  
HECHT

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER

# OTHER POETIC INTERESTS

- Shakespeare and the Bible
- Ekphrastic Poems
- Literary Criticism and Translation



# APPROACHING SEXUAL IMAGERY IN HECHT'S WORK

1. *Sexual Imagery and Violence*: What does violent sexual imagery in Hecht's work reveal about post-WWII perceptions of sexuality?
2. *Sexual Imagery and Ethics*: Does Hecht imply there is a "good" or "healthy" form of sexuality in his poetry? How does this relate to the sexual norms of his time?
3. *"War Poet?"*: How has WWII morality frameworks and late 20<sup>th</sup>-century formalist movements influenced the reception (or neglect) of Hecht's sexual imagery?



*Death the Whore*  
Baskin, 1995



# “THE FEAST OF STEPHEN”

- (Non-ekphrastic poem, painting as reference)
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I

The coltish horseplay of the locker room, [...] Boys for the first time frankly eye each other, Inspect each others' bodies at close range, And what they see is not so much another As a strange, possible version of themselves, And all the sparring dance, adrenal life, Tense, jubilant nimbleness, is but a vague, Busy, unfocused ballet of self-love.

IV

He watches sharply these superbly tanned Figures with a swimmer's chest and shoulders, A miler's thighs, with their self-conscious grace, And in between their sleek, converging bodies, Brilliantly oiled and burnished by the sun, He catches a brief glimpse of bloodied hair And hears an unintelligible prayer.



*The Stoning of Saint Stephen*  
Rembrandt, 1625

# "ELDERS"

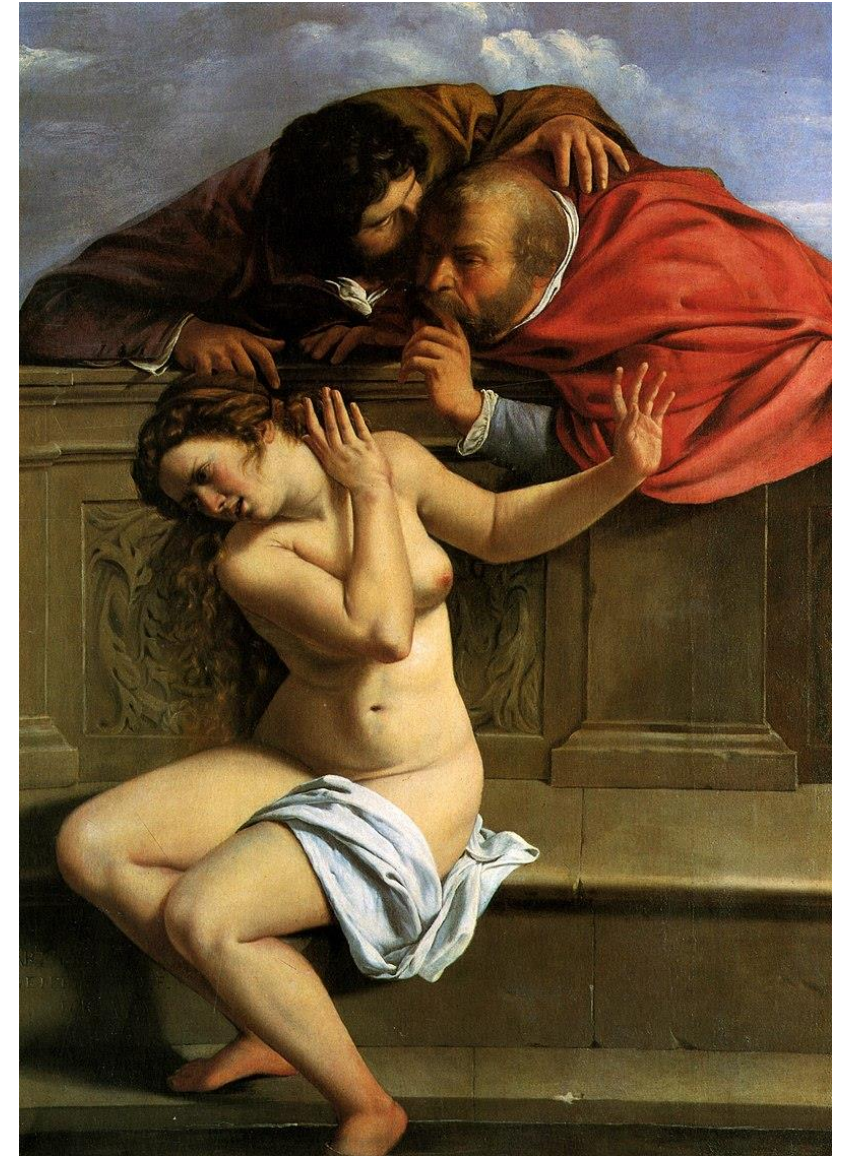
- (Non-ekphrastic poem, painting as reference)

As a boy he was awkward, pimpled, unpopular,  
Disdained by girls, avoided by other boys,  
An acned solitary. But bold and spectacular  
The lubricious dreams that such a one enjoys. [...]

And so it went year by tormented year,  
His yearnings snarled in some tight, muddled sensation  
Of violence [...]

When he was old he encountered someone else  
Enslaved by similar dreams and forbidden seethings, [...]  
Who brought him where they both could observe bathing

In innocent calm voluptuous Susanna,  
Delicate, and a quarter of his age,  
Her flesh as white and wonderful as manna,  
Exciting them both to desire engorged with rage.



*Susanna and the Elders*  
Gentileschi, 1610



# RECEPTION BY NEW FORMALISTS (1980'S – 2000'S)

*"In the 1980s, a group of young poets, enthusiastic about the resources of traditional prosody, began to link formal prosody with conservative political ideology. These were the New Formalists."  
(Cambridge 70-71)*

- Movement developed against free verse poetry (such as Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) and Ginsberg's *Howl* (1954))
- "‘Confessionalism’ [was] frequently cited as the literary sign of the corrupt culture of the 1960s" (Cambridge 74)

**QUESTIONS?**