

The tree of language:
biblical concepts in
hecht's "naming the
animals" and shapi...



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Modern American poets, contending with the disruption of traditionalism in culture, thought that the preoccupation that arose concerning the confines, possibilities, and influence of words that allows for the cultivation of twentieth-century art advanced both poetry and prose. The poets concern themselves with the notion that the agency of communication through words is inexorable yet impossible without knowledge, ultimately radically changing poetic tradition and the way in which language is thought of. I will discuss the theme of authority being given where no ability is present because of lack of knowledge in two twentieth-century poems: "Naming the Animals" by Anthony Hecht and "The Recognition of Eve" by Karl Shapiro. Although Adam is depicted as a natural poet through being given the authority and ability to begin naming in the Biblical account of the creation, Hecht poses an alternative in which Adam's uncertainty about language is a result of his absence of knowledge before transgression, while Shapiro's poem explores the idea of Eve as dominant and knowledgeable. The strong diction and descriptive nature of both poems enforce the idea that reluctance and failure to communicate with language directly arises from an absence of knowledge. Though man is illustrated as the natural poet in Genesis, these two poems suggest that language cannot be properly executed unless knowledge is gained in some way.

Identification of another entity forms unification between the beings. Naming brings us closer to what has been named by turning the opposing entity into a coherent object. Classifying other beings with names forms a personal relationship, like that of a parent naming its child. The Biblical account of creation entails God giving Adam the authority to name each animal that he

created in order to develop a relationship between man and animal (King James Version, Gen, 2. 19).

Hecht explores the notion of naming something with specificity which is normally named generically, and how language can have a disconnect between humans. In the Bible, animals are divided from humans, for humans are to have dominion over all that God had created, yet Hecht undermines the division between the seemingly separate entities through his humorous diction and tone. Animals are most often referred to by the generic name of their species when spoken of, which is what God had commanded Adam to “bestow /...upon all the creatures,” He had created (“Naming the Animals” 1-2). The animals were to be “yclept,” by Adam, being given the same authority of the poet who uses language to develop meaning (8). The poet uses opulent diction filled with wit, adopting comic intentions into his work through the meaning and undertone of his words. “Yclept”, although meaning “named”, is used with serio-comic intention by authors to undermine the weight of the work (OED 1. a. “Yclept”). Hecht’s version of Adam allocated a personal name to the creature, endowing a deeper sense of meaning to their relationship with humorous intent. The author playfully teases readers to enforce the idea that literature, specifically the Bible, and language, is not always to be taken so literally, and is to be looked at with different meanings. Hecht’s use of his diction having an ulterior meaning represents the significance of knowledge being advantageous for Adam to understand what God had truly meant by naming, and largely, that language is not always apt for communication without this desired knowledge.

Conversely, Shapiro analyzes what it means to name something with lack of specificity that is normally specific. After naming each animal, and seeing no suitable helper for himself, God creates woman out of man's rib. Upon seeing his helper for the first time, he immediately labels her 'woman' (Gen 2: 23). Shapiro's account of the creation of woman explores the idea of Eve speaking the first words of human and her naming Adam. His use of diction forms the notion of Eve identifying herself in relationship to Adam, naming without specificity, like Adam had in the Biblical account. In labelling him "thou", Eve attempts to identify and categorize him and their relationship with each other ("The Recognition of Eve" 15). The use of calling Adam 'you' is an attempt at establishing a profound defining connection between the two humans. Eve speaking rather than Adam establishes the idea that Eve has some superior knowledge to Adam and an authority over him. Shapiro enforces the idea that Eve's attempt at defining the relationship through the use of language fails as Adam becomes "terror-stricken" when she speaks and she resorts to physical touch "for he must feel the place to understand" (16; 18). Shapiro's diction strengthens the contrasting effects between language and physical touch. Communication, here, is presented as effective only when physical touch is involved. His diction presents the idea that mere language is deficient when one individual lacks knowledge and the ability to understand.

Many of God's servants in the Old Testament are reluctant to follow God's commands for fear of failure. Jeremiah, prophet of God, is reluctant to follow God's commands for he believes he is incapable of speaking for he is too young (Jeremiah 1: 6). His reluctance to communicate through language lies

in his belief that he has a lack of knowledge due to his youth. He is hesitant to speak the word of God until he understands that God has given him the ability to communicate with his words.

Although Adam is confident in his ability to name the animals in the Biblical account of the creation story, Hecht presents him as reluctant to follow through with God's commands. Hecht uses the title, "Naming the Animals", to present the commandment of God as being a seemingly simple and straightforward task. It is immediate and apparent to the reader what God has asked of Adam in this poem. However, the seemingly simple task becomes convoluted as the poem progresses. Hecht depicts Adam as reluctant to follow through with God's commands in the same way as Jeremiah. His hesitancy also lies in his belief that he is lacking in the skill of communication through language. As God gives the command and disappears, Hecht notes that He "seemed to take no notice of the vexed / Look on the young man's face" illustrating the trepidation that Adam will not be able to successfully accomplish what is asked of him. ("Naming" 5-6) This worrying ferments in Adam as he stands before the animals with "an addled mind and puddled brow" unsure how to advance (10). Hecht presents his readers with the sensory experience of a confused and worried man, reluctant to speak, for he is unsure if he can achieve what is being asked of him, in contrast to the confident and willing Adam in the Bible. His reluctance is derived from his belief that he lacks the knowledge to progress.

In the same way, Shapiro depicts Adam as reluctant, and ultimately unable, to speak. Effective communication transpires when both parties can

communicate equally and both contribute. In this depiction of the account, <https://assignbuster.com/the-tree-of-language-biblical-concepts-in-hechts-naming-the-animals-and-shapiros-the-recognition-of-eve/>

Eve presents Adam with the opportunity to respond to her, yet he fails to. His inability to communicate in return forces her to “(forget) him” and retreat from him in search of something else (“ Recognition” 29). He, subsequently, is described as an observer. As Eve leaves him, he “ could see her wandering through the wood, / (and studies) her footsteps as her body wove / In light and out of light,” enforcing the idea of Adam as the empirical observer (31-33). His lack of knowledge gives him the desire to understand Eve merely through observation with the prospect of gaining insight. Shapiro uses imagery in order to depict Adam in this way, making him the reluctant speaker, but the effective observer. The meaning of the title of the poem, “ The Recognition of Eve”, becomes apparent when this is noted. Shapiro denotes Adam as the observer in that he comes to have a recognition of her through his observation. He attempts to recognize and know her through studying her actions as his inability to communicate with his words is made evident. The idea that recognition through observation in replacement of that from language forms the notion that an individual must first gain some knowledge prior to communicating linguistically with another.

When the garden of Eden was formed, God planted a tree of knowledge of good and evil that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from for He stated that they would surely die if they did (Gen. 2: 17). Original sin is the moment that Eve disobeyed God’s command and bit into a fruit from the tree. It was only from this act of transgression that Adam and Eve were able to gain knowledge. Despite it being sinful, both Hecht and Shapiro suggest that this sin has brought the knowledge necessary and ability for communication. The tree of knowledge, discerning evil from good, perhaps also contains

knowledge in its entirety. Hecht continues to use diction with multiple meanings in order to create significance on those words. Adam is commanded “ to bestow names” to all the animals in the garden of Eden. Hecht’s use of the word ‘ bestow’ proposes the idea that their names are each a gift from Adam, and the ability for him to do this, if he could, would be a gift from god (OED 6. a. “ Bestow”). Adam had not yet undergone the act of transgression from eating the fruit when he began to name the animals in Genesis. Hecht uses this very detail to suggest the idea that Adam, having not yet eaten from the tree of knowledge, could not possibly have the ability to fulfill a task that requires the very characteristic of knowledge. Language and communication, then, is unachievable without this act of transgression. Though Hecht never strictly refers to the act of transgression, the reader can infer from his depiction of Adam that he is lacking the knowledge, which would be gained from the act, necessary to complete his tasks. This poem indicates that perhaps the act of transgression was not harmful to the lives of humans, and was in fact, necessary, for it is only through language that relationships can be established and God’s commands can be achieved.

Likewise, Shapiro also explores the notion that transgression is the sole method of gaining knowledge. It is apparent that Eve has some superior knowledge of where she came from, while Adam is in complete lack of it. Though she attempts to make him “ understand” how she came to be made out of his rib, he cannot fathom in the same way that she does (“ Recognition” 18). Her superiority is a suggestion that her being the first to eat from the tree of knowledge in the Biblical account somehow makes her

knowledge vaster than his. Although the act of transgression has not yet occurred, it foreshadows what is soon to come. Shapiro makes references to Milton's account of Eve truly seeing herself for the first time when she sees her reflection in a "pool" of water (33). The pool, not mentioned in the Biblical account, is mentioned by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. As Eve sees herself in this pool, and is "pined with vain desire" (*Paradise Lost* 4. 6) Adam's observations lead him to believe "she was already turning beautiful" ("Recognition" 35). Eve, like Adam in this account, becomes the observer of herself and begins to recognize her humanity as beauty. Adam cannot yet fathom the derivation of her beauty, for he lacks the knowledge to do so. Though Eve is becoming aware of herself, she is not able to communicate her findings to Adam for he is unable to communicate back. Her humanity is incomprehensible to him for the act of transgression has not yet been undergone. Knowledge of each other and themselves increases when the fruit has been eaten.

Both Shapiro and Hecht depict alternative accounts to the creation story in which Adam is both reluctant and deficient in performing what is asked of him because of his absence of knowledge, resulting in his inability to use linguistic skills. Both authors are aware that proper communication with a lack of knowledge is unachievable, and man cannot possibly have the natural gift of language, for language is a direct subsequent from knowledge. Though each author has distinctions in their vocabulary and syntax, both imply that language is suggested as compensation for original sin. The poet, being regarded as the creator who takes pre-existing conceptions and makes them new, is given the gift of language for the act of transgression.

Communication, being essential to human life and society, is inconceivable without prior knowledge of how to use language.