

August 19, 1985 Washington DC

[To J. D. McClatchy]

Dear Sandy,

[. . .] Belated warm wishes for your birthday. Curious how a process common to us all seems so unique to each of us. At my age my greatest fear seems not to be death itself, nor physical enfeeblement, but mental deterioration, and I think the germs of that fear were laid early on. But however much I try to console myself with the assertion that this anxiety is merely a hang-up of my own, every time I forget a name, or grope helplessly for a word that refuses to come, I think of Alzheimer's disease, and imagine that I will shortly be disabled as a teacher, and will slip quickly into an ungainly dotage, a burden to everyone and to Helen especially. Naturally, I've not uttered a word of this to her. The consequence of this fear is that every time I write anything that indicates complexity as well as clarity of thought I rejoice (briefly) at what I take to be an index that my mind has not yet rotted away completely. Lately I have taken comfort in a rather intricate unraveling of the themes and meaning of The Merchant of Venice that will be the lengthiest of the essays in the coming book [*Obbligati*]. I'm really pleased with it because I'm convinced I'm right—and if I'm right, it means no one else has ever been right before. But also because it confirmed (for a period) a precarious self-confidence. But the writing of it, as well as the thinking it through, is already far enough behind me to count for very little. Poems, of course, work the same way; my pleasure in writing them is intense, and only slightly longer than a sexual spasm. After, they become more featureless and inconsequential than old girlfriends. I have the greatest difficulty reading any of my old poems with the excitement I know I felt around the time of their composition; and I find this terribly unnerving because I can read the early poems of any poet I admire with undiminished delight. I try to tell myself that this is because, being the work of others, they always seem to me original, whereas my own work, being the product of my own mind, is altogether too "expected." I tell myself this to cheer myself up; the alternative (that my work is really no good, and only seems so in the auto-intoxicated throes of writing, and briefly to a few generous friends) is what I avoid thinking as best I can. [. . .]

Tony

1986

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*Irma Brandeis (1905–1990) taught at Bard from 1944 to 1979 and was much admired by the poets who taught there, including Hecht and James Merrill. She was the*