

*Rosenthal (1915–1995), essayist, literary critic, and translator, lived in Italy in the 1950s. “Thekie,” Thekla Clark, was a family friend and eventual author of the 1996 Wystan and Chester: A Personal Memoir of W. H. Auden, in which Hecht makes a cameo appearance.*

October 4, 1951 American Academy Rome, Italy

Dear Parents:

Well, I’m here. Ray Rosenthal made the trip with me, as had been planned, and as Thekie told you. He wanted to come up anyway, for his own reasons: he’s writing an article on Roman archeology for The New Yorker. The whole trip was made without any difficulty; even the cat caused no particular trouble (she lives in my rooms, and I take her for a walk in the garden every day), although she was pretty scared by the trip, and by being carried in a box the whole way. We left Ischia at 5 in the morning, spent some time in Naples, where Ray had some chores to do, and took the train for Rome at 2 in the afternoon, arriving at the Academy at about 5:30. There was nobody here to greet us, Mr. Roberts, the director, and his staff having gone down to Naples the same day to greet the new Fellows arriving on the boat from America. They just got here last night and I have really not met anyone much yet.

I have two large rooms, a bedroom and study, that look out on a beautiful courtyard designed like a cloister, with a garden designed around four beautiful and immense cypress trees which stand at the four corners of a pool, fed by a lazy fountain, and sustaining an immense goldfish. The furnishings are practical, though not especially beautiful: there are two very comfortable beds, one of which is being used by Ray, and it will be removed after he leaves, two large armoires, a large bureau, table, bed-table, fine old-fashioned academic desk right out of an American university professor’s nightmare, three arm-chairs, two ordinary chairs, two lamps in the bedroom, a desk-lamp, and a large book-case. The walls are completely bare, and are painted white, so that although the rooms are very bright most of the day, they have a certain chill and monastic cast to them. I hope to get some reproductions to put up in order to relieve the asceticism of the place a bit. [. . .]

Let me tell you about my interview with Auden. It lasted two and a half hours, and he went over each one of my poems very carefully with me. It was a slightly tense business, as I had anticipated, because he was naturally concerned that I shouldn’t take offense at any critical comment he made, and at the same time he wanted to be as honest and scrupulous as he could be. I took no offense at anything, of course, but when I tried to defend certain things I had done,

he behaved as if he thought I resented his criticism, and he would modify his position and qualify his comments into oblivion. He told me he liked the poems very much, though I don't know what that really means, since I think he would have said that in any case, providing he didn't actually dislike them. Some of his comments about details were very apt and helpful, but he has a totally different way of conceiving a poem from the way I have, and he feels that I've been too much influenced by Ransom and Tate not in style but in theory. He feels that details are an ornamental embellishment to verse and should never be allowed to distract the reader's attention from the main line of discourse, whereas I believe that the details should be made to subsume, to contain, to embody, to incarnate the point and meaning of the poem. In a way, I think we're working towards the same goal from opposite directions, but my way is better suited to me than his. He said of the "Aubade" for example (the one coming out in Kenyon) that there was too much detail, that the poem could have been written in the same number of stanzas, but with each stanza of four lines instead of ten. He liked best of all the poem I sent to Poetry called "La Condition Botanique." And he told Ray and Elsa Rosenthal the next day, that he thought my poetry was better than most of the younger poets, specifically Wilbur's and Shapiro's—though, I don't see how Shapiro gets into the "younger" category any more. You must not misunderstand me; the whole interview was carried on in the most cordial terms; it's just that there was a difference of opinion on some points which we sensed more strongly than we declared. And now, upon reflection, I feel that there's much in Auden's point of view that's valuable; which is what I mean when I say that we are working towards the same goal from opposite directions. And I think he may be right most of all in saying (as he said to the Rosenthals but not to me) that my verse was perhaps too formal—not in the metrical sense, but in being somewhat impersonal in tone, disengaged from the central emotions of the poems. This is mainly what he has against Ransom and Tate, and with many qualifications, he's right. In any case, it has given me something to think about, and that's a good thing. [. . .]

Love,  
Tony

P.S. Any word from Oscar Williams about any further anthologies?