You and I admire and delight in the same details of Jonson's comments: about those who "think rude things greater than polished, and scattered more numerous than composed." Numerous is superb there, and reminds us that numbers is another term for poetry. Yet even as one approves of Jonson's poetic rectitude, in theory as well as in practice, one recalls his haughty remark to Drummond of Hawthornden that Donne "for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging." There is no question that the music of Jonson is more regular and clear-cut than Donne's; Jonson's poetry, though capable of a variety of paces and a diversity of moods, seems rarely to offend against what might be called a unity of sentiment: the tone, even the mixed tones, of a poem, are consistent and maintained throughout. But Donne often does something quite different and virtually opposed to this: the poems shift direction, change mood, alter as a voice alters in the course of speech. It is a more flexible range than Jonson either has or wants. And this vocal trick of Donne's allows him to be comic and serious simultaneously, to give you the impression that he's thinking as he is writing, that he is open to impulse and improvisation at all moments; whereas Jonson's poetry seems by contrast "composed" in the special sense of being plotted and planned, revised and premeditated. Both Helen Gardner and A.J. Smith (the Penguin editor) have useful things to say about Donne's versification, and make it fairly clear that in that precise regard the poet was not nearly so eccentric as modern readers with an uncertain ear, or Ben Jonson, for that matter, have claimed. [. . .]

Many grateful thanks for continuing this exchange with me.

Tony

August 8, 1985 Washington DC

[To J. D. McClatchy]

Dear Sandy,

I am greatly impressed with, and deeply grateful for, your extremely thoughtful and penetrating essay ["Anatomies of Melancholy"]. It strikes me quite simply as the very best critical piece I have ever seen about my work. Indeed, what I have seen over the years has been, by and large, so very disappointing—being either trivially superficial, or patently wrong, and usually both—that I have grown to approach the reading of any such thing with dread and depression. And I frankly admit that it was in this spirit that I opened the envelope that contained your essay. So you will understand, I hope, how genuinely delighted I am, and how surprised. [. . .]

What really impresses me is your large and compassing view of my work,

your shrewd, and I think altogether sound view of it. This has nothing to do with "value" judgments. I mean to observe how keen you are in discovering a "mother" in "The Hill," a judgment that seems to me perfectly right. Indeed, your whole thesis of a union of opposites turning up in many forms seems to me right, and the right way to describe my characteristic strategies. In other words, I could scarcely be more pleased and gratified by what you have so carefully and thoughtfully done. [. . .]

Concern[ing] your astute comments on "Dichtung und Wahrheit," and the oppositions of "truth" and "art," or subjective and objective, etc: having [. . .] just finished going through the essays [forthcoming in *Obbligati*], I find that this opposition in one form or another is the principal theme that links the essays together. It is obviously central to the essay, the first in the book, on "The Pathetic Fallacy," which ought to be out any day now in The Yale Review. But it is present in virtually every other essay as well, and is obviously central to the very essence of criticism: how do you know when you are describing a thing accurately, as distinct from imputing to it biases and attitudes of your own? How do we get at the truth of a work of art? Or anything else, for that matter. How do we avoid "willful" or even "inadvertent" mis-readings? As bald questions, these are not continuously articulated in every essay; but they are implied throughout, and they, I hope, make for a coherence I very much hope some reviewers will notice, though I suppose the chances are very poor. [. . .]

One more thing. The oppositions in the poems and essays have probably grown over the years to be a sort of technique of the imagination, a mode of apprehension. It has become firmly my own, I guess, and habitual. Whether it came to be because of my personal psychic history or not I can scarcely say. But it may be worth pointing out that it is the "dialectic" mode of Yeats, who has always been a literary hero and mentor of mine. Not only in his poems but in his prose, and chiefly in his theoretical writing (A Vision) oppositions lie at the center of everything. There was a time when I frankly tried to imitate Yeats's declamatory style. I wisely gave that up. But there were things in his life, as in his view of art, that chimed with my experience. He yearned to be other than he was, to become his opposite. I need no one to point out the differences between us, even apart from the question of comparative merit. He made a very public career for himself in art and politics, the sort of career from which (especially as it applies to theater) I have instinctively shrunk. But if the connection is useful to you, there it is.

Love
Tony