

Memorial Art Gallery nor the Art Library of the University was able to help me in any way.

We send our love,  
Tony

August 18, 1978 Rochester NY

For Robert Fitzgerald

Robert, how pleasantly tempting to surmise,  
As Auden half suspected,  
That heaven and the benign Italian skies  
Are intimately connected.

And once there we shall truly be translated  
In grand Italian style  
And bella figura flourish, who are fated  
To tarry here the while.

Amid hill towns and palaces where dwell  
The blessed of heaven's See  
They shall address you as Signor Freetzjell,  
Me, Signor Hecate.

With love,  
Tony

*Commenting on a poem that William MacDonald showed him, Hecht was led to recall an incident from his own army experiences not published elsewhere. A version of the events recorded here exists in the Hecht archive at Emory University.*

September 1, 1978 Rochester NY

Dear Bill,

I'm delighted by your poem, "Hadrian Orders the First Batavians to Swim the Danube." [. . .] The first part of it seems to me especially successful, exactly conveying that insufferable arrogance of high-ranking officers who, under the guise of undertaking no more than the enlisted men, show off with useless feats of strength or daring—[. . .] supremely without regard to the cost in life to others of such heartless ostentations. The smug, vain, unawareness of

Hadrian, the decent compassion of the veteran who speaks, are both clear and telling.

I am, however, less certain of the propriety of the tone in the last part. The propriety, that is to say, of the explicit complaint. After all, when a soldier signs up, he is, for the term of his service, putting his life itself on the line whenever it's called for. No doubt it can be called for foolishly, to no great purpose, merely for the convenience of the top brass. You and I both know of such behavior from our own war experiences. I myself remember a particular example. My regiment was stationed on the west bank of the Rhine, across from Cologne. The east bank of the river was fortified by a very high, immensely thick wall of reinforced concrete. Orders came down from, not merely Division, but from Corps or perhaps even from Army, to send out scouting expeditions at night in rubber boats, to reconnoiter the far side of the river. Two companies (not my own, thank God) were chosen, in both of which I had friends, to perform this foolish, pointless and costly errand. They went out at night in rubber boats, were spotted by enemy searchlights above those walls, and were ruthlessly machine-gunned in the middle of the river.

This happened not once or twice but time after time, and there was no information to be gotten, even had the enemy not fired a shot, except the fact that there was a thick concrete wall on the far side—a fact which you could tell by looking across the river in the day time. This, however, took place during our division's first three weeks of actual combat; and the speculation throughout my own company on the reason for this mindless massacre was simply that our Division Commander, who had himself never committed any troops to combat, was too scared to disobey one of his first combat orders—to conduct reconnaissance of a specified kind. It was my first real insight into the way wars are regularly waged. Outraged, however, as my feelings were then and still are, it would never occur to me, in a mild and reasonable tone, to argue with the general on what he has a right to do, on what we've signed up for, on Justice. What I guess, after all this palaver, I'm getting to is perhaps merely the excision of about two and a half lines. [. . .] Anyway, my quibble is small, and your poem is a strong and fine one. [. . .]

We send our love,  
Tony

*Gary Metras (1947–), poet, reviewer, and the editor and publisher of Adastra Press, taught high-school English for thirty-one years. In the summer of 1975, he studied*