not able to pay him much, and were ill-organized, and didn't know when they'd start shooting, he was planning to fly back to the States in a few days. The next day Gloria came around and we went back to the art shop. This time I was able to narrow things down to three prints—2 Rouaults and a Braque. The Braque was an original signed wood-cut in three colors, limited to 50 copies, of which I had the 40th. The Rouaults were black and white, unnumbered and unsigned. The main thing, however, was that the whole thing came to 50,000 francs, or about $140. [. . .]

Love to all,
Tony

1950

Karl Shapiro (1913–2000), poet and essayist, was the editor of Poetry *magazine from 1948 to 1950. The poem referred to below, "Alceste in the Wilderness," appeared in the magazine's September 1950 issue, and was later included in* A Summoning of Stones.

June 19, 1950 New York NY

Dear Mr. Shapiro:

Thanks very much for your note. I'm taking advantage of the invitation to send the poem back with an "explanation"—which is not meant to be a justification of obscurity. If you think the poem doesn't stand up without the help of this appendix, you might either use the following as a note or else disregard the whole thing. I will send along some other work when I get it done.

The poem is based on Molière's The Misanthrope, wherein, you may recall, Alceste, the protagonist, cannot reconcile the forms and morals of society with his own notion of what is honest and real, and he goes into voluntary exile at the end of the play. He leaves behind him the girl he loves, Célimène (to whom the poem refers only through pronouns: her underthings, her laces—because her presence is recalled to him only vaguely by the agency of the pastel tones of the snuff-box, his only souvenir of life in society), and it is likely that Philinte, formerly his best friend, will become his most important rival for Célimène's affections after Alceste leaves. So much for the characters. The point of the thing would be something like this: having renounced the "artificial" ways and convictions of society, Alceste finds himself nevertheless unable to assimilate reality simply by stepping into its midst; it is too full of unaccountable violences. "He could distill no essence out of this," as opposed, for example, to Samson, who in

a similar situation (when he saw the lion's carcass full of bees and honey) came up with an observation about sweetness rising out of strength, which he put to his fiancée's family in the form of a puzzle. The point here, I should think, would be that sweetness is due to come out of Samson's strength when, at the end of his life, he works God's Will. In my poem, the monkey is a symbol of lust, as the lion was of strength, and Alceste's difficulty is that he does not understand how sweetness might issue from this, and is appalled to see them instantaneously linked. Though the heat and vague memories of Célimène arouse lust in him, he prefers to think that the monkey looks like Philinte, his present rival, rather than like the girl or himself, who would suit the occasion equally well. Unable as he is, then, to assimilate reality in its rough state, he is presented with the alternative of accepting it at the "aesthetic distance" of a pastoral version, such as the design of Daphnis represents on his snuff-box. A pastoral version of nature is of course a partial one, an "artificial" one, and is particularly favored in the courtly society which Alceste has just renounced. It is, if you please, what Eliot and Tate might call a "lower mythology," very low, perhaps, but a mythology in that it serves to reconcile human beings to reality and nature. If it is artificial, it is no more so than the society that accepts it, and without its help, or the help of a "higher mythology" no essence is likely to be distilled. This is why Alceste goes back. There is a deliberate ambiguity in the line, "In the pale shade of France's foremost daughter," which is not too important, but I might as well throw it in while I'm at it. If shade is read as tint or color the line would refer to Célimène, who might well be France's foremost daughter in the estimation of Alceste, and who is always recalled to him in terms of tints and colors (as in the second stanza about the snuff-box). But if shade is read as ghost, it cannot refer to Célimène, who is still alive as far as this fiction is concerned, but refers to the more objective notion of France's foremost daughter, Joan of Arc. Not only is she France's patron saint (if there can be a feminine patron saint) but she represents a purity and sweetness that Alceste misses in his present situation, and she is able to reconcile the violences of reality at the remove, this time, of a "higher mythology." This is not likely to occur to Alceste, who, I take it, is not a religious man, but it might occur to the reader. The pun is really not very important, and I'm afraid I've labored it too much.

I'm embarrassed at having gone on at such length about my poem, for I suspect that a poem should not need this much exegesis on the poet's part, at least. The main difficulty might be resolved, perhaps, by a note to the effect that Alceste, Philinte, and the nameless "she" are persons in the Molière comedy, and that Daphnis is merely a pastoral swain appearing in the design of Alceste's

snuff-box. But I cannot remember that any poem appearing in Poetry has ever needed notes before (except "The Waste Land") and it may well be an important weakness in this one.

Let me thank you again for your interest in my work. I hope to send you more in the future, but I'd be glad to know what you think of the enclosed.

Yours,
Anthony Hecht

Polly and Oscar Williams were friends from Kenyon, the latter not to be confused with his namesake, the anthologist Oscar Williams, mentioned in the following letter, who was to include several Hecht poems in his New Pocket Anthology of American Poetry from Colonial Days to the Present *(1955). Paul Radin was the younger brother of Max Radin, the author of the 1916 work* The Jews among the Greeks and Romans, *cited in Hecht's letter below of November 1951.*

August 22, 1950 Amsterdam, Holland

[To his parents]

Ha, there—

[. . .] I was able to lead a relatively tranquil life in Paris, and to see a lot of my old friends. One of them was Paul Radin and his wife, for whom Polly and Oscar and I prepared a rather spectacular welcome to Paris. We rode in the Metro from the Pantheon, which is near Oscar's home, to the Gare St. Lazare, immaculately clothed, clean white shirts, bow ties, and all necessary finery, including gloves. However Oscar and I were both wearing wigs.

Oscar had one which looked sort of like Henry V's hair, from the movie of the same name, and I had one with a bald pate, and blond hair around the edges down to my shoulders. Oscar carried a copy of Pravda [the official communist newspaper of the Soviet Union] and I carried the complete works of Molière. We created quite a stir in the subway and at the station. Mothers could not drag their children from the sight of us. When we got to the station we had to wait about twenty minutes for the train, and were a source of almost unendurable curiosity to the general plebs. Paul was delighted, however, and we saw him several times in Paris. [. . .]

What news of Furioso and New Directions? Let me hear from you and I will write again in a few days.

Love to all,
Tony