

It was an invitation issued to students he found attractive to come to his rooms and drink as heavily as they wished in the evenings. I never went.

Although it wasn't until your freshman year that you fell in love with poetry, you'd been writing it for quite a while. Do you remember what prompted your earliest poems? Can you say what they were about?

I have mercifully forgotten my earliest work. It was far worse than Eliot's. A good deal of it was light verse, though there was one serious poem prompted by one of my father's collapses.

You've described your three years as an undergraduate at Bard as 'unquestionably the happiest... of [your] life up to that time.' How did it feel when, three years into your studies, aged 20, you were drafted into the army, and sent off to fight in the war? Was it something you'd been dreading?

I admit with shame that I felt neither brave nor patriotic. I was profoundly scared. I had, as you say, just encountered something like happiness for the first time in my life, and I was now required to give it up, and perhaps my life as well. My reading had become so important to me that when I finally went off to the army reception centre I brought with me a paperback collection of some Shakespeare plays, an anthology of poetry, some Joyce, and a volume of Spinoza. It wasn't until about two weeks into basic training that I was allowed enough leisure to ferret out one of those books, expecting to slip easily into the receptive appreciation I enjoyed at college. But the words lay blank and flat on the page. It was like reading a telephone directory. The combination of fatigue and the numbing effect of close-order drill, along with other dehumanizing methods of military training, had all but lobotomized me. I feared I would never be able to read anything with pleasure again, should I even survive. It was a terrifying kind of pre-death. In the end, all those faculties returned about six or eight months after I got out.

You saw action in France, Germany and Czechoslovakia, and witnessed the deaths of a great many of your comrades. How did you cope with this?

There is much about this I have never spoken about, and never will. My father made a foolish and pitiful attempt to get me discharged while I was in training in Missouri with the 97th Infantry Division, the outfit with which

I went overseas. He somehow managed to inform officers of the division of his own mental breakdowns, and to imply that I was subject to the same frailties. I was called away from a bivouac to be interviewed by a military shrink. When I figured out what was going on, I realized I had only to put on an act in order to get discharged on what the army called a Section Eight, or 'mental' grounds. I really felt that my life that morning was in my own hands. At the same time, I felt unwilling to fake, and ashamed of what my father had done. I confined myself to acknowledging that I hated the army — like *Catch 22*, this was regarded as a sign of mental soundness — and refusing to address the interrogating officer as 'Sir,' an act of mild but, to me, meaningful insubordination.

Did you make a good soldier?

Not by any real standards. I was honourably discharged at the end of things, and I did not disobey any orders, though once I was genuinely tempted to. My company had been pinned down by very heavy enemy fire in Germany. Our company commander was a fool, wholly incapable of any initiative, who slavishly obeyed commands, however uninformed or ill-considered, from battalion or regimental HQ, and without regard to the safety or capacity of his own troops. (He was later awarded a Silver Star for action that took place on a day when he was behind the lines being treated for dysentery.) Anyway, on this day when we were hopelessly kept flat on the ground by superior fire-power, some idiot at an upper echelon, far behind the lines and blissfully unaware of our situation regarding the enemy (though probably eager to keep all forward movements abreast of one another to protect all flanks) ordered my company to move forward, and the captain ordered us to ready ourselves, though there would have been nothing but total annihilation in prospect. At the last second, higher command called for artillery, which turned the trick. And as we slowly rose from prone positions, I confessed to my platoon commander, a second lieutenant just about my age, that if the order to advance had not been countermanded I was very unsure whether I would have obeyed. 'Of course you would have,' he replied, but with a look that meant a great deal. He fully understood how foolish such a command would have been at the time, but as an officer, whose duty was to set an example, he knew that he would have had to obey.

You served with the Infantry Division which discovered Flossenbürg, a concentration camp in the Bavarian forest, close to the Czech border. It's not as notorious as its neighbour, Buchenwald — it rates a mention in

several of the history books just because it was there that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered, a week before the liberation — but it was a major camp, and one wouldn't have to read a book like Robert Abzug's *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* to understand how devastating an experience it must have been for young G.I.s like you, though you must already have witnessed some pretty awful things. Can you say anything about this event, and its effect on you?

Flossenbürg was an annex of Buchenwald. It was both an extermination camp and a slave-labour camp, where prisoners were made to manufacture Messerschmitts at a factory right within the perimeter of the camp. When we arrived, the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to interview such French prisoners as were well enough to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp. Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges levelled against them, translating their denials or defences back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible. The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking. I must add an important point: after the war I read widely in Holocaust literature, and I can no longer separate my anger and revulsion at what I really saw from what I later came to learn.

Were there any aspects of life in the army that you valued?

Not at the time, certainly. I found that all the officers I encountered from the rank of captain on up were contemptible and often ignorant, swaggering in the full vigour of their incapacity, and this was true up to as high a level as division commander, which I had the opportunity of observing. While I came to this conclusion independently and on the basis of personal experience, I find that I'm not the only one to have held such views. Allow me, if you will, a small literary flourish. In Joseph Andrews Fielding writes about Nature, personified as a goddess of great powers, who equips creatures with a cranial cavity for the brains and their rational government of ordinary men, 'whereas,' Fielding goes on to remark, 'those ingredients being entirely useless to persons of the heroic calling, she hath an opportunity of thickening the bone so as to make it less subject to any impression, or liable to be cracked or broken; and indeed, in some

who are predestined to command armies and empires, she is supposed sometimes to make that part perfectly solid.' It would have been a convenient balance and fitting irony to say that, by contrast, the ordinary draftees with no military ambitions or careers, were often good and generous people, and this is what I believed at first. But a few days of heavy front-line combat changed my attitude in a terrible way. We had already suffered some severe casualties from enemy mortars and land mines. These first casualties and deaths came to us as a rude shock; our friends and comrades, with whom we had trained, undergone real privations and endured grave dangers were now legless, armless, or dead. So the mood of the company was shaken when, one morning, we found ourselves hugging the ground at the crest of a hill, in the shadow of trees, looking out across a green field that dipped shallowly in the middle before rising to a small height not far away, and behind which German troops were lobbing mortar shells at us. We fired back, and the exchange went on for a while, until at last the enemy simply stopped firing. This could, of course, have been preliminary to something else, a trick, anything. We remained exactly where we were. And then, to my astonishment, a small group of German women, perhaps five or six, leading small children by the hand, and with white flags of surrender fixed to staves and broom-handles, came up over the far crest and started walking slowly toward us, waving their white flags back and forth. They came slowly, the children retarding their advance. They had to descend the small incline that lay between their height and ours. When they were about half way, and about to climb the slope leading to our position, two of our machine guns opened up and slaughtered the whole group. Not long after we were able to take the enemy position, from which all their troops had withdrawn. For the rest of the day there was much loud and insistent talk about that morning's slaughter, all intended as justification. 'They might have had bombs on them.' 'They might have had some radio devices to direct German artillery toward us.' Things like that. This was all due to the plain panic of soldiers newly exposed to combat, due also to guilt, to frustrated fury at the casualties we had suffered. In any case, what I saw that morning was, except for Flossenbürg, the greatest trauma of the war — and, believe me, I saw a lot of terrible things. But that morning left me without the least vestige of patriotism or national pride. And when I hear empty talk about that war having been a 'good war', as contrasted with, say, Vietnam, I maintain a fixed silence. The men in my company, under ordinary circumstances, were not vicious or criminal, but I no longer felt close to any of them. Battle, which is supposed to bring fellow soldiers together, failed to do that. As for whether there were any aspects of army life that I val-

ued, I'd have to maintain my equivocal posture. The army put me in what may be the best physical shape I would ever enjoy, and as though to annul this benefit, it taught me to smoke. And I went on smoking, addictively, for thirty-five years.

You said at the beginning of this interview that your parents felt awkward about the Jewish part of their heritage. Did you feel awkward about it too?

In my generation anti-Semitism was widespread and very common, scarcely to be avoided, and indeed regarded as a sign of cultivation on the part of not a few. One of my earliest literary heroes, Eliot, wrote lines I found personally wounding. So did Pound, and too many others to mention, including Dickens. It was virtually a badge of polite society. It also infuses ineradicably some parts of the Gospels, and was almost doctrinal among Catholics of my acquaintance, one of whom, regarding herself as a friend of mine, explained to me that I was 'invincibly ignorant' by way of cheering me up about my hopes for salvation. What I saw at Flossenbürg and what I read about the camps only increased my sense of unrelieved horror. To be exposed to this kind of thing, in literature, in religious doctrine, in personal relationships, over a long period of time can have a very potent effect.

When did the effect begin to wear off?

Curiously, when the war and all its horrors were over and publicly exposed, a number of 'intellectuals', Mary McCarthy and Robert Lowell among them, bravely made public the fact that there were Jews in their family backgrounds. Needless to say, when your name is McCarthy or Lowell you are not likely to be exposed to much in the way of anti-Semitism. But in time I came to feel an awed reverence for what the Jews of Europe had undergone, a sense of marvel at the hideousness of what they had been forced to endure. I came to feel that it was important to be worthy of their sacrifices, to justify my survival in the face of their misery and extinction, and slowly I began to shed my shame at being Jewish.

In the interview you did with J.D. McClatchy, you drew on a distinction made by William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience, classifying yourself as sick-souled rather than healthy-minded. To quote James — though in a way which hardly does justice to the richness of his thinking on this matter — the healthy-minded 'live habitually on the sunny side of their misery-line,' while the sick-souled 'live beyond it, in dark-

rived, that he had allowed so many Sundays to lapse that he had no choice but to attend. The difficulty was that, having escorted his date to her residence hall, he found it was early morning; and he was presented with the miserable choice of going to bed for a very few hours, with the danger of not waking in time, or else of trying to stay up for the first service. He elected the latter, and showed up for chapel in rather dishevelled evening dress. He was also stumbling a good deal, and though he seated himself in the rear, was anything but inconspicuous. The chaplain, a very mild-mannered man named Swann, invited any who were inebriated to leave. I don't know whether anyone else left, but Harry stayed. Eventually, when communion was offered, Harry came forward and reverently bit the chaplain's hand.

After your year at Kenyon, you went back to New York, to attend classes at N.Y.U. being given by Allen Tate. How had this come about? And what are your abiding memories of Tate?

I had met Tate at Kenyon during one of those summer sessions. I asked him if I could study with him in New York, again on the G.I. Bill, and he agreed. I used to come once a week to the Greenwich Village apartment he shared with his wife, Caroline Gordon, bringing whatever poems I had written, about which he was very tactful in his comments. He was always gentlemanly, ironic and courteous. He was very kind to me, and when he got a job teaching at Minnesota, and wanted to leave, he recommended me to take over his teaching job at N.Y.U., which I did.

You began teaching at about this time, but I wonder if you could clear up an uncertainty I have about where you were doing this teaching? One source — The Burdens of Formality — has it that you instructed at Bard and N.Y.U., but another — Contemporary Poets — has it that you instructed at Kenyon, Iowa and N.Y.U.

In one way or another, both sources were right. Not counting my undergraduate math teaching at Bard, my first real teaching job was at Kenyon, for one term. From there I went to Iowa, where I was a graduate teaching assistant. In my second term there I had what in those primitive days was called a 'nervous breakdown', and which today would be styled a 'post-traumatic shock syndrome'. It was arrogant and foolish of me to have supposed that my war experiences could be smoothly expunged by a couple of weeks of heavy drinking. I returned to my parents' home in New York and entered psychoanalysis. Of course my analyst, a good and decent

man, but an orthodox Freudian, was not prepared to believe that my troubles were due wholly, or even largely, to the war, so we went ambling back together, down the rocky garden path to my infancy. But I think he must have helped me, as much by his kindness and patience as anything else. Anyway, after that I went to N.Y.U., courtesy of Tate, and only in 1952 did I get a full-time teaching job at Bard at a salary of \$3,600 a year. As a single man I could live well enough on that. At all these places (except for the brief fling at teaching math) I was teaching either poetry writing or something like freshman English, with, sometimes, a little Renaissance poetry and some Shakespeare thrown in.

Did you enjoy the teaching, or was it a chore?

~~I enjoyed it enormously. Like many young teachers, I found it easy to establish a rapport with students not much younger than myself. And I was truly ignited by my subject — that is, if it was canonical poetry and literature, as distinguished from the poems written by students. And this continued to be true throughout most of my teaching life. During the final ten years or so before retirement, things changed radically and tragically for the worse. English departments — not mine alone, but many throughout the country — broke up into embattled, intransigent factions demanding exclusive allegiance in behalf of their own mostly ideological agendas: feminism, black studies, gay studies, prison literature, deconstruction, structuralism, disestablishmentarianism, all manner of angry causes that were only marginally related to literature. Whole curricula were devised to justify one or another variety of resentment. This was appealing to quite a few students, who were happy to enlist under the banner of outrage rather than submit themselves to the demanding discipline of careful thought and laborious research. And for the teachers, it clearly meant a good deal in the way of mental relaxation. It was, in some ways, the strange fruit of interdisciplinary studies, which allowed you to know a little bit of some form of inquiry and apply it in an easy selective way to such small provinces of literature as you might be acquainted with. It's my guess that Plato's highly theoretical philosopher-king would, in the practical world, turn out to be both a poor philosopher and a lousy king. I suppose Gibbon would have pointed out Marcus Aurelius and Antoninus Pius as exceptions, but, to return to the point, it seems to me that these days very few who teach at the college and university level are devoted to literature for its own sake, and deeply acquainted with it. Instead, they are pulpit-thumping ideologues, sociologists, reformers. These days~~

emy) led me in that direction.

Did you get to know Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes while you were at Smith?

Yes. Sylvia was a colleague of mine at Smith College. I liked them both very much, but this was a particularly troubled and unhappy period of my life. During my three years there two sons were born, one of them during my first year. His mother got breast fever immediately after the birth, and could not nurse him, or, for that matter, do anything whatever. Consequently, I did all the shopping for food, all the cooking for my wife and myself, all the laundry, including the diapers (there were no disposable ones then), and there was no clothes-drier where we lived so that all the laundry had to be hung on lines and taken down when dry. Moreover, there was the formula for the baby to make, and all the night feedings to give, and during this time I was teaching full time. The chairman of the English department in those days, a rather self-absorbed, near-sighted martinet, upbraided me for not providing enough written comment on the papers I returned to my students. I was too dumbfounded to explain my predicament, which he should have been fully aware of in the first place, since other faculty were. In her journals, Sylvia also expressed a bewildered irritation at the fact that my wife and I never returned the hospitality she showed us. This was because my wife simply refused to entertain — in part, at least, because she couldn't cook, and was embarrassed about it. Immediately after our second son was born she went ice-skating and broke her leg, so I had to go through the whole routine — cooking, shopping, laundry, formulas, night-feedings — all over again, and, of course, while teaching full-time as before. Still, there were a few good people at Smith while I was there, beginning with Ted and Sylvia. There was also Daniel Aaron, who became a friend later on. There was Newton Arvin, a gentle and brilliant man, and a critic of the first order, now seriously undervalued. There was Helen Bacon, a gifted classicist, with whom I was later to collaborate on a translation of Aeschylus. And of all of them, the one most dear to me, Elizabeth Drew, an English woman who wrote on modern poetry, was a friend of Auden's, and the soul of kindness. She was fully aware of my marital plight, so there was no reason why the fidgety chairman should not have been as well. Anyway, Smith contrived profoundly to offend Ted and Sylvia in a manner that made them decide to leave after a single year. Sylvia was teaching the same courses as I, and Ted stayed at home, writing, keeping house, but fretful, with too much time on his hands. He wanted to teach too, and

Sylvia arranged a meeting for him with the chairman. Ted was told they couldn't hire him because he had no teaching experience, though this had been no barrier to their having appointed Sylvia, who had none either. But of course she was a Smith graduate. The indignation Sylvia felt about this, and which Ted probably felt as well, though he kept his feelings under better control than she, was little short of explosive. They firmly resolved to leave at the end of the year, and they did so, to the utter astonishment of the chairman, who hadn't the slightest clue he had offended them. They settled for a year or so in Boston, where Sylvia joined Anne Sexton and George Starbuck in one of Lowell's classes at Boston University.

Your teaching at Smith came to an end in 1959, the year you won your second Guggenheim. It was also the year in which you and your wife separated, taking your two boys with her. How did all these developments affect you? Are you the sort of person who can go on writing in the midst of great turmoil, or are you the sort who, as Kafka might have put it, needs both hands to ward off the blows?

When I'm troubled or unhappy my faculties are paralyzed and I can't write at all. And, alas, I was unhappy virtually throughout my first marriage, which lasted five-and-a-half years, to be followed by my total separation from my children. The divorce decree required her to live within a certain distance from New York City, so that I could continue to see them regularly. But in due course she found herself engaged to a very wealthy young Belgian, and she told me, 'Of course, you have a legal right to make me stay here; but if you do, I will be very unhappy, and if I'm unhappy, the children will be, too.' Against such an argument I was quite powerless.

Maybe I can quote from an earlier passage in Kafka's diaries than the one I was alluding to just now, only I'd like to hear your reaction to what he says there:

'Have never understood how it is possible for almost everyone who writes to objectify his sufferings in the very midst of undergoing them; thus I, for example, in the midst of my unhappiness, in all likelihood with my head still smarting from unhappiness, sit down and write to someone: I am unhappy. Yes, I can even go beyond that and with as many flourishes as I have the talent for, all of which seem to have

nothing to do with my unhappiness, ring simple, or contrapuntal, or a whole orchestration of changes on my theme. And it is not a lie, and it does not still my pain; it is simply a merciful surplus of strength at a moment when suffering has raked me to the bottom of my being and plainly exhausted all my strength. But then what kind of surplus is it?

I fear that I have never been granted Kafka's bountiful surplus of energy that he was able to call up during crises or depressions. I can think of few things more enviable. I have no reserves of imaginative energy to draw on in periods of darkness. Ransom, who proposed what might be thought of as a doctrine of 'aesthetic distance', which I found easy to adopt, used to say that the poet who wanted to write a love poem would be well advised not to do so in the first fine frenzy of his passion. He would be too close to his experience, too giddy with its pleasing chaos and turbulence to be able even to understand himself, let alone to put his feelings and thoughts into some disciplined order. The writer, Ransom would maintain, who can best create powerful feelings in his reader is precisely the one who has mastered these feelings before trying to set them down on paper. And Eliot would add to this that the writer can also describe and evoke experiences he's never actually had — a matter that the stunning variety of Shakespeare's and Dickens's and Browning's characters ought unarguably to demonstrate, though the tendency in our era is to regard lyric poems as purely the seismography of the life of the individual soul. Flaubert wrote to his mother in December, 1850, expressing much the same requirement of absolute personal detachment that Ransom recommends, though in Flaubert's case, far more severely, and by way of explaining that he was determined never to marry, feeling that his vocation as a writer forbade it. He wrote, 'You can depict wine, love, and women on the condition that you are not a drunkard, a lover, or a husband.'

That reminds me of something Pascal once said: 'Few men speak humbly of humility, chastely of chastity, sceptically of scepticism.'

How very sound; and how chastening.

After the departure of your children for Europe, you had to be hospitalized for depression. How long did that last, and what longer-term effects, if any, did it have on your life and career?

Deep breath. I was hospitalized for about three months. I was put on

Thorazine, and some other medications I no longer can name. These were alternative treatments to the electric shock therapy more commonly administered at that hospital, which was called Gracey Square. (There were public pay phones in the corridor on my floor, and outsiders could call in through those phones, which could be answered by any patient, and it was more or less standard practice for patients to pick up the phone and say, cheerfully, 'Crazy Square.') I met some nice people there, and some that were deeply, frighteningly troubled. (One, who had to be subdued with a hypodermic, makes his way briefly into a poem of mine.) I myself was merely badly depressed. I was fortunate in liking and trusting my doctor, who, wisely, had forbidden, with my complete consent, any attempt on the part of my parents to visit me — a prohibition my father took pains to violate. I don't know how he got in, but he did, on the pretext of bringing me some toothpaste or cigarettes. He suddenly appeared one day, very briefly, in the hall, and handed me these things. And his grin was terrible, almost triumphant. I was revolted. We exchanged no words. It was after I was released that Lowell went out of his way to be kind, helpful and friendly to me. He was especially gentle and considerate, knowing well what such institutions are like, though we did not discuss the topic. Frederick Morgan, the editor of *The Hudson Review* was also uncommonly kind to me during this period. Fred and his co-editor, Joseph Bennett, had given me, just around the time my wife and I had separated, a *Hudson Review* Fellowship, meant to free me to write. I told Fred candidly that I was not going to be able to use it, and that he would be wise to offer it to someone else. But he refused to reconsider, and the consequence of this was that when my wife departed, she quite literally cleaned me out, taking with her, among other things, my baby grand (though she couldn't play a note), a painting that had belonged to my grandfather, and all but five hundred dollars in our joint bank account, including, of course, the Hudson grant. As to 'long-term effects,' it seems to me that if it can be said that everyone has some overriding fear, mine has been insanity. And I think this lurks behind a number of my poems.

~~You told J.D. McClatchy that you had a theory about why it was that so many American poets had been affected by mental illness, but you declined to set it out, on the grounds that there wouldn't be enough space. If I promise to make the space, can I induce you to say something about your theory?~~

~~That's a tall order, and you wouldn't have nearly enough space. It's a book-length topic. And it applies not simply to Americans but to poets of~~

*On colours, and had found his primary pigment
Here, in a taxi cab, on Eighty-ninth street.
It was the absolute, parental yellow.*

When talking about moments like these, some of your critics have reached for the word 'epiphany', but I wonder if you share my doubts about the word's appropriateness? It's normally used in connection with experiences which are revelatory — confronting us with the true nature of things — while, whatever their power to disturb or enchant, the experiences you recount don't seem to be revelatory in this sense. Or am I missing something?

No, I think you're right; there is no revelation, just an altered state of mind. Someone I know who had scientific information at hand, told me that in fact in the light that precedes a thunderstorm the colour yellow becomes more vivid, and that there's a scientific explanation for this. Your juxtaposition of 'Apprehensions' with 'A Hill' seems to me shrewd and right: their emotional trajectories turn in opposite directions. No one, as far as I know, has pointed this out before. And while I agree with you about the absence of epiphanies, I think there may be some connection with the idea of 'looking' as a crucially important act. At the end of 'The Venetian Vespers' the speaker (who is a composite person, partly my brother, much more a man I knew in Italy) says, 'I look and look, / As though I could be saved simply by looking ...' Simone Weil wrote that 'looking is what saves us,' and Ruskin declared, 'The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one' (*Modern Painters*). One of the things I think I learned from Bishop, from Hardy, from Frost, concerned particularity and clarity of seeing. Seen with enough precision, things become wonderful, and one can see a world in a grain of sand. Bishop indeed alludes to Blake's line about the grain of sand in her poem 'Sandpiper,' and again and again in her poems she holds things up 'close to the eye.' I feel compelled to add that this was not a faculty with which I was endowed. It took conscious pains to acquire. In this I find myself in agreement with Matisse, who said, 'To see is itself a creative operation, requiring effort.'

The topic of looking came up in the interview you gave Langdon Hammer back in '96. On that occasion too you quoted Weil's remark about

looking being what saves us, but you then went on to say something I thought very interesting: 'Surely part of that "salvation" is engendered by a capacity, at least momentarily, to forget ourselves, and fully to attend to something else.' In trying to explain this, you referred to something Auden once wrote, in an essay entitled 'Pride and Prayer':

'To pray is to pay attention to, or shall we say, to "listen" to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention — be it on a landscape or a poem or a geometrical problem or an idol or the True God — that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying.'

Auden's thinking on this matter seems to be heavily indebted to Weil — the words could almost have been taken from *Gravity and Grace* — but rather than come full circle, you try to complete your explanation by referring to one of Pascal's *pensées*, which you judge to be equivalent in meaning to Auden's description of prayer: 'Le moi est haïssable.' Now, I'd like to ask why it is you think the self hateful, or, to put the same question slightly differently, why it is you think self-forgetfulness is so blessed a state. I assume that it's not because you think the self distracting, like a fly buzzing around one's study, making concentration difficult, but, rather, because you think the self corrupt, so constituted as to sully any looking that is not self-forgetful? That, at any rate, is one natural way of reading lines like these:

*Here is the microscope one had as a child,
The Christmas gift of some forgotten uncle.
Here is the slide with a drop of cider vinegar
As clear as gin, clear as your early mind.
Look down, being most careful not to see
Your own eye in the mirror underneath,
Which will appear, unless your view is right,
As a darkness on the face of the first waters.*

These lines are taken from one of the most distinguished, and haunting, of the poems in *Millions of Strange Shadows*, 'Green: An Epistle', which goes on to paint a truly disturbing picture of the self's development:

*Whole eras, seemingly without event,
Now scud the glassy pool processionaly*

*Until one day, misty, uncalendared,
As mild and unemphatic as a schwa,
Vascular tissue, conduit filaments,
Learn how to feed the outposts of that small
Emerald principate. Now there are roots,
The filmy gills of toadstools, crested fern,
Quillworts, and foxtail mosses, and at last
Snapweed, loment, trillium, grass, herb Robert.
How soundlessly, shyly this came about,
One thinks today. But that is not the truth.
It was, from the first, an everlasting war
Conducted, as always, at gigantic cost.
Think of the droughts, the shifts of wind and weather,
The many seeds washed to some salt conclusion
Or brought to rest at last on barren ground.
Think of some inching tendrils worming down
In hope of water, blind and white as death.
Think of the strange mutations life requires.
Only the toughest endured, themselves much altered,
Trained in the cripple's careful sciences
Of mute accommodation. The survivors
Were all, one way or another, amputees
Who learned to live with their stumps, like
Breughel's beggars.*

This will require a complicated answer. Your point of departure is something I said in an interview with Langdon Hammer, who was asking me about 'looking', with particular regard to two poems of mine, 'The Venetian Vespers' and 'Meditation'. He even quoted a line or so from 'Vespers', to which I responded with those comments from Weil, Auden and Pascal. Your question, however, seems to appropriate my response to Hammer and to apply it to another poem, 'Green: An Epistle'. If this procedure is not entirely wrong, neither is it entirely right. Let me try to explain. 'The Venetian Vespers' is about an invented character, largely a man I knew in Ischia, partly my brother, and necessarily something of myself. But for the most part, the character is invented. He is a deeply troubled, neurotic, hampered man, and his misery only exacerbates his self-concern. This is a common enough form of mental behaviour. In one of his stories called 'Enemies', Chekhov writes, 'In both men the egotism of the unhappy was powerfully evident. Unhappy people are egotistical, mean, unjust, cruel and less capable than stupid people of understanding each other. Rather

than bringing people together, unhappiness drives them further apart, and even where it would seem that people ought to be joined by a similar cause of sorrow, they make themselves much more injustice and cruelty than in an environment in which people are relatively contented.' My speaker in 'Vespers' is alert enough about himself to recognize the egotism engendered by his unhappiness, and to want to escape from it by 'looking', as Weil and Auden hinted that he might.

But you go on to pose this question: 'I'd like to ask why it is you think the self is hateful, or, to put the same question slightly differently, why it is that you think self-forgetfulness is so blessed a state.' And in proposing this question, you have in mind some lines from 'Green', and not just some lines, but indeed the main thrust of the poem. I can make a start by saying that I myself as an acknowledged voice and presence am far more involved in 'Green' than I am aware of being in 'Vespers'. And 'Green' is, like 'Vespers', about the infections of the ego. To write carefully about this problem may be beyond the proper limits of an interview such as this, but I'll make a stab at it.

That rather pathetic poseuse, Edith Sitwell, once declared, 'Pride has always been one of my favourite virtues. I have never regarded it, except in certain cases, as a major sin.' But I find myself more in accord with the Church Fathers, with Milton, and others who find Pride the most radical, pervasive, and nearly ineradicable of all the sins. And this is so because Pride is capable of so many ingenious and unlikely disguises. That cool, unsentimental moralist, La Rochefoucauld, observed, 'Self-interest speaks all sorts of languages and plays all sorts of roles, even that of disinterestedness.' Our capacity to think well of ourselves is versatile to the point of monstrosity. And this is probably true even of those widely regarded as wicked. They would number among themselves the 'progressive tyrants', those who put into effect the Soviet Five-Year Plans and the Chinese 'Great Leap Forward', social programs of great human cost, undertaken in behalf of some impossible utopian ideal. And of course there are others among the wicked who feel no personal responsibility for their crimes, blaming society or their parents for any of their misdeeds.

Pride can disguise itself as humility, or more accurately, some kind of false humility. And it is not always so transparent as in the case of Uriah Heep. I know quite a number of people who quietly pride themselves on what they find in themselves as a modest and unassuming character; they are deeply tainted with a moral smugness they cannot for the life of them recognize. It may be that as in those infinitely regressive images of oneself that can be seen in the facing mirrors of a haberdasher, the nearest image of oneself might be regarded as the most patent kind of false-humility. But as the images recede, getting smaller and further away, it be-

comes more difficult to tell where falsity leaves off and the genuine begins. Even self-hatred can serve as one of egotism's disguises, and it does so, I believe, in *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov is thought, even by himself, to have committed his crime out of a sense of superiority, of being a superman; in a word, of pride. It's possible he believes this, and there's no doubt many literary critics and commentators on the novel believe it; and the novel furnishes many examples of Raskolnikov's egotism and pride. But near the end (Chapter VII, Part Six) this hero thinks to himself (in the Coulson translation, with the emphasis in the text itself), 'I am cruel, I know. But why should they love me so much, when I am not worthy of it? Oh, if only I were alone and nobody loved me, and I had never loved anyone! All this would never have happened.'

Now, 'Green: An Epistle' is about the disguises of Pride. It is about how attempts to suppress the ego in behalf of some idealism or the desire to appear kind and generous will quietly and all unbeknownst to someone convert that suppression into a corruption of the soul, a deformity of spirit, and the longer the suppression goes on the more martyred and selfless one feels, and the more monstrous the deformity. The universal desire to think well of ourselves almost invariably involves the suppression of memory as well. Almost everyone commits foolish or unkind acts of which they are ashamed; and the normal reaction is to forget them. Freud has a lot to say about memory lapses, but it may be added that there is something profoundly merciful about the myth of the River Lethe, with its healing relief from the painful memories of our follies as well as our more serious failures.

Self-forgetfulness can be achieved in many ways, and there are those so agonized with physical, mental or spiritual pain that they seek some kind of oblivion. Drugs and drink are commonly employed; anaesthesia is often welcomed. The longed-for death in certain of Eliot's poems, the comfort of death in *The Waste Land*, where it is said that 'Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow,' makes clear how desirable is forgetfulness.

The speaker in my poem, 'Green', who is admittedly partly me, has succeeded in deceiving himself into believing that his long-suffering patience and forbearance, his stoic endurance, have paid off in the form of a noble and selfless character, and in this he is profoundly mistaken.

In your conversation with Langdon Hammer, you expressed a worry about Auden's definition of prayer, the worry, namely, that it takes no account of the self-forgetful person's cause, where he or she has such a thing. The

unmixed attention of a surgeon can perhaps be called prayer, but what about the unmixed attention of the torturer? And there's a related worry, or set of worries, which I can best get at by quoting from another very accomplished poem in The Hard Hours, 'Ostia Antica'. The poem centres on an incident described by St. Augustine in Book IX of The Confessions. The scene is 4th century Ostia Antica, not far from Rome. Augustine and his mother are waiting for a boat that will return them to Africa, and have been engaged in a conversation about time and eternity, a conversation which gradually takes on the most extraordinary character:

'And when our conversation had arrived at that point, that the very highest pleasure of the carnal senses, and that in the very brightest material light, seemed by reason of the sweetness of that life not only not worthy of comparison, but not even of mention, we, lifting ourselves with a more ardent affection towards "the self-same", did gradually pass through all corporeal things, and even the heaven itself, whence sun, and moon, and stars shine upon the earth; yea, we soared higher yet by inward musing, and discoursing, and admiring Thy works; and we came to our own minds, and went beyond them, that we might advance as high as that region of unfailing plenty, where Thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth, and where life is that Wisdom by whom all these things are made, both which have been, and which are to come; and she is not made, but is as she hath been, and so shall ever be; yea, rather, to "have been", and "to be hereafter", are not in her, but only "to be", seeing she is eternal, for to "have been" and "to be hereafter" are not eternal. And while we were thus speaking, and straining after her, we slightly touched her with the whole effort of our heart; and we sighed, and there left bound "the first fruits of the Spirit"; and returned to the noise of our own mouth, where the word uttered has both beginning and end.'

The first six stanzas of 'Ostia Antica' give us a panoramic view of Ostia – though that's a poor way to describe lines as rich and suggestive as these – and then, in the sixth and seventh stanzas, the focus narrows, and what we read are the words of Augustine and his mother, now self-aware again, but meditating on the significance of that extraordinary moment of self-forgetfulness:

'If there were hushed
To us the images of earth, its poles
Hushed, and the waters of it,
And hushed the tumult of the flesh, even
The voice intrinsic of our souls,
Each tongue and token hushed and the long habit
Of thought, if that first light, the given
To us were hushed,

So that the washed
Object, fixed in the sun, were dumb,
And to the mind its brilliance
Were from beyond itself, and the mind were clear
As the unclouded dome
Wherein all things diminish, in that silence
Might we not confidently hear
God as he wished?'

The poem could almost have ended there, but it doesn't. There's one more stanza, and that stanza dramatically unsettles our perspective on all that's gone before:

Then from the grove
Suddenly falls a flight of bells,
A figure moves from the wood,
Darkly approaching at the hour of vespers
Along the ruined walls.
And bearing heavy articles of blood
And symbols of endurance, whispers,
'This is love.'

Of course, it's possible to interpret these lines in very different ways, but no matter which way we read them, it seems to me that they make plain the importance of the larger view, a view which takes in not just causes but also consequences ...

First of all, let me say that in quoting Augustine's *Confessions*, the passage you select is from Book IX, chapter x, paragraph 24. But the two stanzas of my poem that you quote are a verse paraphrase of the paragraph following that, paragraph 25. The translation I believe I used for the poem was that of J.G. Pilkington.

The poem was written at one of the most troubled and unhappy periods of my life. Normally, when I am deeply depressed I can't write at all, so the existence of this poem is, in a purely private way, a kind of miracle. It undertakes to bring into some conjunction three kinds of love. The first is a heedless, more or less innocent hedonistic and erotic love, one that takes eager pleasure in all the luxurious capacities of the senses, not omitting the sheer delight in 'seeing'. The second is the transcendent, immaterial love of which Santa Monica and her son speak, and which I try to paraphrase. The third is the self-immolating and sacrificial love of Christ. Just in what way these three modes of love applied to me in my tormented quandary I cannot now say with assurance. But at the time I felt as though their contradictory, or at least diverse, impulses were not only at work within me, but dividing me against myself.

There is one part of your question that invites some sort of elaboration from me in response. You ask, 'The unmixed attention of a surgeon can perhaps be called prayer, but what about the unmixed attention of the torturer?' The torturer is a special and especially ghoulish case, because he is right there, and can't avoid knowing what he's doing. But special though the case may be, the Third Reich seemed to have no difficulty in finding plenty of staff to run the camps. But the problem is made more difficult when we come to those bureaucrats like Eichmann, and many other paper-shufflers below him and beside him, who took a statistical view of their labours and duties. They are not completely to be distinguished from the bombardiers who do not see the result of their handiwork.

As for your comment that the final stanza of the poem brings it to a new and unexpected element, I think you are right. It introduces pain where there had been none before. It is pain that might be redemptive, but just possibly might not. This was a quandary, and a torment in which, for a long time, I dwelt.

~~There's a fine poem in Millions of Strange Shadows which seems not to have attracted much attention. I'm thinking of 'Swan Dive', which is as good a description of a dive — both from a diver's point of view, and an onlooker's — as I'm able to imagine. It's another of the poems in which you explore discontinuities of one kind or another, and I wonder if you can explain the attraction these discontinuities have for you?~~

~~First of all, I'm gratified that you like the poem, not only because I rather like it myself, but because it was singled out for abuse by a reviewer, who said something like: in this poem we are told more about diving than we~~

had done in your early poem, 'Tarantula or The Dance of Death'. In others, he speaks as one of a range of characters — a punchinello, a film director, an archbishop, a carnival barker — danse macabre style. The poem I'm most affected by is the one in which Death speaks as a whore. It's the longest poem in the sequence, and bears comparison with some of your earlier monologues — 'The Grapes', for example. Its closing couplet has the same, completely disorienting, effect on me as certain lines of Rilke's. — Where does a poem like this come from? Do you know?

This will require a long answer, and one that will probably not be altogether satisfactory. Which, to answer your question briefly, is to say that I don't entirely know. Let me try to get out of this pickle by quoting Eliot — from his 'Conclusion' to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. This passage is pretty well-known. 'Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a watermill; such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer.' This may come close to explaining some persistent images of bleak landscapes and scenes of desolation ('A Hill', 'An Autumnal', parts of 'See Naples and Die', of 'The Short End' and so forth) that find their way into my poems. The image of smoke rising straight up from woodlands on a windless, overcast winter day is something that has settled somewhere deep inside me, and, to paraphrase Eliot, means more to me than I can say.

So much for that. Now to a different and larger topic. I've known three women who committed suicide. Two of them are well-known: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The third I will call Mary. Apart from this spectacular inclination to self-destruction, one would suppose they had not much in common psychologically; and indeed they were very different from one another. I'm sure that psychiatrists would tell you that each person who is driven to suicide suffers from problems that are unique to that particular person, and no generalizations whatever can be drawn. Our mental worlds are as unique to us as F.H. Bradley said they were. Still and all, I can't help feeling, purely as an outside observer, that there was a strange link among these three women, in regard to the way they thought about the act of suicide itself. They were all intrigued by what we might call the 'lure', the 'audacity', what to at least two of them might fairly be called

the 'glamour' of the act. Let me begin with some lines from Plath's 'Lady Lazarus':

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it —
.....
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
.....

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

With all allowances for the corrosive irony that this poem exhibits (in which she will go on to imagine herself as the resurrected, vengeful and retributive victim of concentration camp annihilation), I can't help feeling that the poem begins with an admission that death has its attractions, even if they consist of the chance to come back and destroy others. (And of course, to revert to psychiatric wisdom, suicide is medically regarded as an ultimate act of aggression.) Without wishing to labour the point any further, let me turn to some lines by Anne Sexton, these from a poem called 'Sylvia's Death':

Thief! —
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and so long,
.....
the death we drank to

And it seems to be a matter of record that they did indeed 'drink' to the earlier attempted suicides in their careers. In the interview she gave *The Paris Review*, Sexton recalled going with Plath to the Ritz Bar in Boston, accompanied by George Starbuck. This was after class sessions with Lowell at Boston University: 'Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides, in detail and depth — between the free potato chips. Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We

talked death with a burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric lightbulb, sucking on it. She told the story of her first suicide in sweet and loving detail, and her description in *The Bell Jar* is just the same story. I wonder if we didn't depress George with our egocentricity; instead, I think, we three were stimulated by it – even George – as if death made each of us a little more real at the moment.'

Isn't it interesting that, just as Plath wrote of having died three times already, so Sexton talks of their suicides rather than their suicide attempts?

The locution is odd, but it is also characteristic. This is the way both Plath and Sexton spoke of these things, suggesting that they were entranced by flirtations with death, had passed over into its realm, and returned – like Lazarus. – To be sure, their poems are very different from one another's. Plath's poetry is one of cultivation, savagery and outrage, while Sexton's is Grand Guignol, with a defiantly cheerful vulgarity. (Reporting in *The Observer* for 16 July, 1967, regarding *Poetry International*, Mary Holland commented, 'Auden brooded in dark glasses while an American poetess went on and on about her "second suicide".' It was perfectly clear who was being referred to.) Even so, for both of them death was a sort of goal, and so it was for Mary, who was not a poet. But she was smitten by the glamour of both of them, and their suicide attempts were a part of that glamour she found attractive, and understood because she had made the attempt herself. When, after Sylvia's death, Mary found out that I not only had known her but knew Anne, who was still living, and whom I continued to see from time to time, Mary was unashamedly importunate, begging me to introduce her. I lived in New York at this time, and Anne just outside of Boston; I never went up there in those days, and she rarely came to New York because she had a Boston publisher, Houghton Mifflin. Nevertheless, an occasional reading would bring her my way, and once she let me know that she would be coming to the city with her designated biographer, Lois Ames, whom she had inherited from, of all people, Sylvia Plath. When Mary learned that Anne was to come to the city she implored me more desperately than ever to contrive an introduction, and so I arranged to take the three ladies to dinner at a nice French restaurant, rather an extravagance for me, and in more ways than one, since the evening turned into a minor disaster. Mary and I arrived first at the restaurant and were seated when Anne and Lois showed up. Though I had carefully explained to Anne that Mary had begged to meet her, and that the dinner was planned with that meeting in mind, Anne, who could be temperamental, chose to be so that evening. She took little if any no-

tice of Mary, and made it clear that she was put out to have my exclusive attention to her compromised by the presence of an intruder. She proceeded to get very drunk. She may well have had a couple of drinks before she turned up at the restaurant, and while I can't remember anything about what we ate or drank that evening, it would have been normal for us to have had a cocktail, probably a martini, before ordering dinner and wine. Anyway, by mid-meal Anne was behaving erratically, and people at other tables were beginning to notice. At one point she fell right off her chair and onto the floor. Something about the way this happened suggested that some energy or effort on her part had gone into the fall. I had to get her up off the floor, usher her outside onto the dark city street, where the winter air, flaked with a light snow, seemed slowly to cool her down or sober her up, and we were able to make our way back to the table and finish our meal. Later, after the whole embarrassing evening was over, I apologized to Mary for Anne's very bad behaviour, and, to my astonishment, Mary not only felt that no apology was called for but found Anne even more enchanting than she had before. It was something about Anne's wilfulness, her reckless disregard of correct social behaviour, that she liked, and that had in her mind some obscure connection with the socially defiant act of suicide. She also had other heroines, social misfits and drug addicts. So I was not surprised to learn years later that she had killed herself.

These are some of the materials that went into the poem. Much of it, of course, was invented. The childhood game is indeed something I recall from my own childhood; the smoke of the last line is a conflation of the smoke of Sylvia's death camp, the death camp I saw myself, the ordinary funeral parlour crematorium and the smoke of an autumnal day mentioned in the opening lines. The speaker in my poem is not really at all like Mary, except insofar as they both were lured by the act of self-destruction. Almost all the particulars are different. But Sylvia, Anne and Mary all went into the poem in some way.

There's an old Zen technique for dealing with pain, which involves giving the sensation one's undivided attention. By turning it into an object of inquiry, it is said, one can deprive the sensation of its hurtfulness. I wonder if there isn't a sense in which this is what you're doing in The Presumptions of Death, trying to draw death's sting by squaring up to him in all these different guises? If so, then by the time we get to the book's second part, Proust on Skates, and death has claimed two more of your friends — James Merrill and Joseph Brodsky — we are able to see in the magnificent elegies you write for them just how limited in its effec-

tiveness the technique has been. Their deaths obviously hit you very hard ...

I have no knowledge of the Zen techniques you speak of, and that one seems to me especially forbidding, like immersing oneself in the destructive element, or Mithridates habituating himself to poison by ingesting it. In any case, it does not apply to the writing of at least some elegies, including my own. The task of writing a poem is a difficult one for the likes of me, and few of them come easily. Writing is utterly preoccupying, and it not only leaves no room, in the course of composition, for grief, but it does nothing either to dispel or to indulge such grief. The motives of an elegy are, first, to make a good poem, and then to make it a tribute to someone in particular. And there may be a hidden, Miltonic motive: 'So may some gentle Muse / With lucky words favour my destined urn, / And as he passes turn, / And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.'

Well, it was the Presumptions I had in mind when I mentioned that Zen technique, not the elegies. But that said, you're quite right to criticize my naïve reading of the latter, treating them like – to revert to the imagery you introduced earlier in our discussion – seismography of the soul.

But to turn to your question about the deaths of Jimmy Merrill and Joseph Brodsky: they did come to me as powerful shocks. Jimmy's death was itself shrouded by the fact that it took place miles away from all but one person who knew him, out in the southwest where we were led to believe he had gone on a holiday. There were no reports until the very end that anything was amiss. Joseph's health, of course, had been a well-known problem for a long time. He'd undergone two by-pass operations and was readying himself for a third at the time he died. He was a hopelessly addicted smoker, who flatly disregarded the repeated advice of his friends and doctors to stop. He believed, as most addicted smokers do (I was one and believed the same) that he wouldn't be able to write if he quit. I remember once saying to him that if he got married, he would surely quit; to which he replied, 'That's a poor reason to get married.' I first met Jimmy in Rome in 1950; I met Joseph at Harvard when I was teaching there in 1973 and he was newly arrived in America. He had been invited by Harvard to read, and he asked me shyly, in the most touching and diffident way, if I would be willing to read the English translations of the poems he intended to read in Russian. We were friends ever after, and like Jimmy, he was a guest at our house whenever he was in any town we were living in. Both of them died prematurely. Their absence is some-