write, "Eliot somewhere quotes a French scholar who noted that Shakespeare used every conceivable style except the simple . . ." The Frenchman alluded to here is one M. Guizot, but the one who makes note of his views is Arnold, in his Preface to Poems (1853). This is a passage in Arnold I know quite well because I find it irritating and wrong. He describes Lear as a play in which "the language is so artificial, so curiously tortured, and so difficult, that every speech has to be read two or three times before its meaning can be comprehended." This comment fails shockingly to take account of the fact that at the dramatic and climactic moments towards the end of the play, Lear speaks with a heartbreaking simplicity that gains its power and authority precisely from its contrast with the bombast of what went before. There are few speeches anywhere in any of the plays that carry the power of "Pray, do not mock me./I am a very foolish fond old man, /Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less; /And, to deal plainly, /I fear I am not in my perfect mind. /Methinks I should know you, and know this man; Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant what place this is; and all the skill I have/Remembers not these garments; nor I know not/Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me; /For, as I am a man, I think this lady/To be my child Cordelia." From my point of view, Arnold and Guizot have missed the boat. [. . .]

I am, as always, very grateful to you for your thought and encouragement. [. . .]

Tony

Charles Tung, a student of Hecht at Georgetown, went to Oxford for graduate studies, when this letter was written. He now teaches at Seattle University.

February 2, 1994 Washington DC

Dear Charles:

[. . .] Now to mistier matters. I have not seen Schindler's List, and I'm prepared to believe that it is very powerful and effective. I could half persuade myself this is the case precisely because Spielberg was too young to have been personally involved in WWII, so that for him the task was one of trying to make vivid something that for most people is difficult to believe. This is the task of most theater directors, including those who direct Shakespeare. By way of contrast, though I never suffered like those who were prisoners in the camps, I did actually see one; and I need nothing to make it vivid to me. Secondly, except for Wiesel's Night, I have read no "literary" works about the prison camps that seem anywhere nearly as effective as straight reportorial accounts, because the facts themselves are so monstrous and surreal they not only don't need, but cannot endure, the embellishment of metaphor or artistic design. Please note that I

am not saying what Adorno so famously said: that after Auschwitz there can be no more poetry. The right answer to that is one Mark Strand offered. After Auschwitz one can no longer eat lunch, either, but one does. What I am saying is that Homer could write unflinchingly about war because it was conducted according to certain codes that acknowledged brutality but revered heroism. Nothing of that sort obtains any more; the facts are too astonishing in themselves to be framed in a comprehensible context.

And there is another matter as well. I try as a matter of principle to avoid polemical or political poetry. Robert Frost once said, poetry comes from griefs, not grievances. Indignation is a bad foundation for any art, mixed as it always is with simple-minded self-righteousness. And nothing poets can write in the hope of being shocking can come anywhere near the actual facts. For this reason I do not much care for the engagé poems of Carolyn Forché. Poetry should not put itself in the position of trying to compete with headlines. Its power must be of another kind. W.H. Auden: "Poetry is in its essence an act of reflection, of refusing to be content with the interjections of immediate emotion in order to understand the nature of what is felt." Politically committed poetry is not interested in arriving at that understanding.

To return to another of your questions, my inability to read or write poetry during the war had little or nothing to do with its horror, at least on a conscious level; though no doubt I lived in a continuous state of fear of my life. But military training is so completely fatiguing and mind-numbing that the intelligence seems to lapse completely, as close-order drill is intended to assure. All military drills and routines makes thought both difficult and superfluous.

As for Lowell's remark that you can say anything in poetry as long as it is correctly placed, he borders on a kind of truth. Poetry ought to be able to assimilate anything, but context and scope are all-important. Hence Homer's ability to describe stomach-turning deaths and get away with it. Hence the many literary revolutions when both words and subject matter that once were deemed anti-poetic found a place in poetry; the Romantics were true revolutionaries in this way. Blake wrote of "shit," which he spelled "shite." The "pylon school" introduced industrial images where pastoral scenes had reigned. The interplay you correctly recognize between whatever we think reality is and some vision or version of it in words is always tricky, tentative, and subtle.

[. . .]

This comes with warmest and heartiest good wishes for the New Year,

Anthony Hecht