

first encountered Sissman's poems. Hecht wrote a brief introduction to his poetry for *The Wilson Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1995).

August 14, 1970 Saltaire, Fire Island, NY

Dear Ed,

Thanks for your very heartening letter about "Green." I'm much indebted to you for your comments. I should like to know, further, if you think the second section should just be struck out, whether some other connective passage should replace it, or whether it should be rewritten, eliminating the "wry self-deprecation," but keeping those elements—the foreign room, the wobbly table—that are echoed in the last lines of the present version.

As for elucidation, I'm not sure I shall be much help. I'm still too close to the poem and therefore not quite reliable about what's in it. But I'll hazard a few words. It was a consuming paranoia that I had chiefly in mind (and, though this is scarcely relevant, and certainly not meant to be legible in the poem, I had in mind three different people only one of whom is a woman.) But with the appropriation of the evolutionary metaphor, the poem is really meant to work in a double way; that is, it presents a conception of nature as possibly malign. It has always seemed odd to me that so little notice is taken of the fact that all the current theories and commonplaces of evolution began along with nineteenth century ideas of progress; and that we unconsciously take for granted that any development of any species is a consequence of the survival of the fittest, which is in itself an assurance of the best. Best, at least, in the capacity either to outwit or overcome circumstance by brains or strength. But there is a certain naive optimism in this view which rests rather more on faith or on the heart's desire than on any proveable fact. Perhaps, when the terms of the poem are converted over to the psychic realm, the phrase "naive optimism" is unfair, and ought to be replaced by something like Santayana's "animal faith." I mean by this not only that man is born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward (and sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof) but that the whole of our psychic lives are given over to active and energetic motions toward some goal we esteem, or submission to what seems inexorable. We conceive these postures to be adequate and right, and we hope to be wiser or better or possibly even happier because of them. It would be dangerous for us to think otherwise. But the psychic life can be self destructive in even more camouflaged a way than nature. I suppose that the poem is also ambiguous in that it can be read as a self-accusatory statement by the speaker. That is to say, the reliability of the speaker may be questioned. Is he paranoid, and therefore given to seeing evil

everywhere? There is, however, a sense of universal moral corruption that is intended to embrace the reader along with everyone else. How can we recognise evil if we are untainted with it ourselves? Who is not tainted with it; and who, in the end, can be a reliable witness?

I'm afraid I've sounded terribly pompous and inflated about the poem. No doubt not much of this comes through; and of course in the time of writing it, the thing worked itself out pretty unconsciously.

Warmest greetings,
Tony

1971

February 5, 1971 New York NY

[To Richard Howard]

Dear Richard,

Findings is really a splendid book, better, I think, than Untitled Subjects, though comparisons of this kind are foolish to make. Anyway, if the earlier book won a Pulitzer, Findings deserves at least as much. I've read it over with care and delight, and find myself deeply moved both by whole poems, and sometimes simply by certain little locutions, like the snake-swallower's "It isn't much different, what I do,/Except it's what I do." All of it seems genuine and admirable.

That is meant as tribute, and is sincere. What follows is comic gloss. You will observe how carefully I've read through the book by the following, as yet untitled, work:

"The beast is dying, will die, this year Of Gray's Elegy, . . ."²

A mild complaint of schoolboys, you would suppose.

But no. Marxists have long despised its smug

British condescension toward the poor,

And as a medical man

Unpolitisch, trained at Hopkins and Zurich,

I can attest to divers mortal fevers

Brought on by a too careless text. Take Werther.

A bloody epidemic.

²A line from Howard's poem "Scenes from the Life of Behemoth." A typescript version of Hecht's poem found in the archive does bear the title "Death and Literature."