version of Gross's essay, which would appear in The Burdens of Formality *(1989), bearing the title "Anthony Hecht and the Imagination of Rage."*

June 4, 1987 Washington DC

Dear Ken,

I've read over, with enormous appreciation and gratitude, your long and careful essay on my work. It seems to me that you have deserved praise on several counts. First of all, you have deftly located the strand of "rage" that runs through a number of major poems from first to last—a discovery, I may add, that no one else has made—and which is an important element in any view of my work. (It's present, of course, in a number of poems you don't mention, like "Behold The Lilies of the Field," but your essay is already of considerable length. I should add, too, that you were acute in observing that translations afford a convenient mask through which rage may be pronounced by a borrowed persona.) Secondly, your detailed remarks on particular poems, especially on "Alceste in the Wilderness" and "The Deodand," seem to me subtle and intelligent and thoughtful in all their abundant details. You have clearly read not only these particular poems with care and attention but most of my poems, and make astute use of many of them in the course of your comments. So your first venture into criticism outside the Spenserian realm is enormously impressive.

I am, nevertheless, rather puzzled that you should have found "Green: An Epistle" as baffling and opaque as you do. You seem to circle around it as though it denied entry, and was meant to keep the reader at a distance, through irony and other devices. But it's hard for me to believe that poem is as cryptic and resistant as you declare. Much of what you say about it is certainly true: it is about "growing up," though that, of course, is no simple business. It is more precisely about the familiar modes of self-deception that almost everyone employs. It is therefore about illusion or delusions, and it consequently borrows the allegorical myth of Plato's cave, transformed into a modern movie theater.

Let me volunteer a few sketchy comments in the hope that they may clear up some of your bewilderment. There are two characters in the poem, the letter writer and the person to whom he writes. Call them writer and reader, or W and R. Most of what W writes is an unattractive account of the character of R, who does not appear in the poem in his own right, so that all we know about him is at second hand. And of course the immediate question is: how reliable is W? In a poem so concerned with deception and self-deception, this is no small question.

W writes about the imperceptible development of human character, comparing this to the evolution of plant life, or even of fossil fuel and gems—a

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process infinitely more ancient than the development of beasts or humans. He also is writing about the fact that, by virtue of the very use of the evolutionary metaphor, we seem to affirm, whether consciously or unconsciously, a notion of progress or advance. And what this means in terms of the psyche is that we incline to see ourselves in the best possible light; and what's more, that everyone does so, including the patently wicked. We see ourselves as both the active figures who deserve credit for the initiative they have contributed towards this progress, as well as the passive and sometimes helpless victims who have heroically risen above and overcome the calamities that have been imposed upon them. (Thus the two kinds of amoebic life, active and passive, seen on the microscopic slide.)

But the Roethke epigraph is not used inappropriately. Not everyone who is persecuted is thereby made saintly, and the "new life" that begins with "lopped limbs" may have to rely on the energy of rage merely to remain "life" at all. In writing as he does, in using this "allegorical mode," in employing the vast "evolutionary metaphor," W is indicating that he is not merely describing R, but instead a large "psychic type," a kind of person not altogether so uncommon. For nearly everyone has some capacity for self-exoneration, and for viewing the past in a highly selective and self-protective way. Certain kinds of people like to see their defeats and miseries as heaven-sent mortifications of their pride, yet Freud has told us that such mortifications and repressions can be deforming, and we prefer to think of ourselves as noble rather than deformed. But deformity lies at the center of this poem. It declares that repressed malice does not make us "saints" as in the epigraph, but makes us more unconsciously cruel than overt action would. It addresses R in the assumption that, having endured a lifetime of repressed rage and malice, he mistakenly believes he has risen above them, and has attained the serenity that so much suffering entitles him to. But W maintains that this is smug and false, and that the malice has simply found new and more ingeniously "innocent" ways of expressing itself, as in "the rose," taken to be the apogee of the plant kingdom according to one version of the great chain of being. W is astute enough to see that R may envision W as being this very kind of person himself, though R is able to hold this view self-protectively, by imagining such a poem being written about W by "somebody else," i.e., not by his innocent self. In other words, the poem is about all the involution and intricacies of paranoia.

There are some other "allegorical" details in the poem. When W describes his location in "a border town" with a view that embraces both sunrise and sunset, he is placing himself at a solitary vantage from which to view the whole prospect of past and future. In this he is doubtless being self-serving—trying to

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sound objective and Olympian. But the poem is clearly self-reflexive: we don't know how true it may be about R (though our experience of the world tells us there certainly are such people) but it strongly suggests that W himself, for all his diagnostic skill, may be suffering from the very illness he so minutely diagnoses—as is often the way with paranoia.

Finally, I think there is a certain kinship between this poem and Auden's that begins "Since you are going to begin to-day," and which he later titled "Venus Will Now Say A Few Words." To the degree that there was any influence at all, it was almost entirely unconscious, since I did not discover the parallel until well after my poem was written. But of course I had read Auden's years before, and who can say how firmly it may have lodged in my unconscious mind?

If you can accept this account of the poem, I think you would have to agree that it is not "impersonal," as you have declared, and that it deals rather nakedly with the kind of person who is (sometimes not unjustifiably) suspicious of others, while being no less suspicious of himself. It is in fact quite "intimate," and the intimacy is hinted at not only by the fact that W claims to know R pretty well, but that they have for years entered into collusion in avoiding the topic addressed in the poem. As when people politely pretend to be friends, though suspecting one another of deep malice.

Please let me know if this clarifies the poem for you in any way. Meanwhile, let me express once again my great gratitude to you for all the thought, intelligence and work that went into your long essay. And let me add that I look forward to reading what you are going to write on Othello.

With best wishes,
Tony

David Mason (1954–), poet, essayist, and anthologist, co-directs the Creative Writing program at Colorado College. He studied with Hecht at the University of Rochester and wrote his Ph.D. thesis on W. H. Auden, which was co-directed by Hecht and Daniel Albright.

July 31, 1987 Washington DC

Dear David:

Thanks for your note. I agree that you should delay getting in touch with [Edward] Mendelson and [Nicholas] Jenkins until you've digested a lot of material and narrowed the focus of your inquiries enough to be able to ask some useful questions. Incidentally, a press release on new UR faculty, sent to me by George Ford, indicates that [Daniel] Albright must have a sound knowledge of

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