Poets, like journalists, historians, are after the truth. But what kind of truth, exactly, do we find in poetry?
In his “Dedication” to *Don Juan*, Byron strikes a characteristically spicy note. After ruminating for a couple of stanzas on Milton and comparing him, with irony, to the then Laureate, Robert Southey, whom Byron hated, he concludes an ottava rima with: “Would he [Milton] adore a sultan? he obey/ The intellectual eunuch Castlereagh?” Not quite content with that, Byron provides an alternate couplet, which employs an inferior rhyme but an even more pointed assault: “Would he subside into a hackney Laureate—/ A scribbling, self-sold, soul-hired, scorn’d Iscariot?” Byron adds:

I doubt if “Laureate” and
It takes a special kind of poet to maul a rhyme for the sake of the truth, and, of course, Byron here eats his cake and has it too. In general, one does not look to poems for factual truths, lest Keats’s Cortez be permanently swapped for Balboa in the history books. But if poetry proves largely unsatisfactory to Plato and Detective Sergeant Joe “Just the facts, ma’am” Friday in terms of veracity, then what kind of truth is poetry after?

I’d like to offer a few thoughts about truth not from the point of view of the philosopher but from that of the poet (receiving thereby a significant demotion in Socrates’ rankings in the *Phaedrus*, from first place to sixth out of nine. Poets follow such types as household managers, financiers, doctors, and prophets, and outstrip only manual laborers, sophists, and tyrants). The tension between poetry and truth gave Goethe the title of his autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (“From My Life: Poetry and Truth”), written between 1811 and 1833. W. H. Auden borrowed Goethe’s title in 1959 for a prose sequence on love, and, in 1977, the poet Anthony Hecht (a great admirer of both poets) took the same title for a poem in which he considers, among other things, Goethe, the Second World War, and the thorny relationship between truth and art. Hecht conveyed the truth of his war experience as a poet not as a journalist or historian.

That poetry greatly enriches our experience is not a hard case to make: the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, *The Divine Comedy*, Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays, and *Paradise Lost*. It’s impossible to imagine our lives—our language—without them. When we say, “His voice was stentorian,” or “He is to the manner born,” or “It was sheer pandemonium,” we employ just a smattering of the countless words and idioms derived from these works, which are woven into the fabric of our daily talk. And, of course, these works routinely speak to one another, like cousins sharing news of distant relations at a holiday dinner. One work allusively gossips about another work, a practice to which T. S. Eliot—with his footnote-bedizened *Waste Land* and its references to Dante, Shakespeare, Kyd, Nerval, Baudelaire, the Upanishads, etc.—was rather a latecomer.

So keen is Shakespeare on the story of Dido, the Queen of Carthage, for example, that he mentions her four times in *The Tempest*, twice in *Titus Andronicus*, and once each in *The Merchant of Venice*, *2 Henry VI*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Now it is likely that Shakespeare borrowed these references to the “widow Dido” in *The Tempest* not from the *Aeneid* but from Montaigne’s essay “Of Diverting and Diversions,” in John Florio’s translation of 1603, but this is
just a further example of how such references are cross-pollinated and propagated.

In fact, as Eliot knew, allusion itself is a great propagator of culture. The story of Dido for Shakespeare is a liquid bit of cultural currency, known to all, a story that plays equally well in the upper stalls and down among the oyster shells. Hamlet himself enacts a similar bit of cultural recuperation, recalling for the players Aeneas’s tale to Dido: “The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,/ Black as his purpose, did the night resemble/ When he lay couchèd in the ominous horse . . .” From Timaeus to Virgil to Montaigne to Shakespeare: as stories and references find their way through successive generations of writers, they are revised and revitalized. Allusion is one of the ways that poems mean.

We love these great poems for the stories they tell and for the history they contain. They give important information about who we are as a people, the roots of our customs, our words, our values, and our beliefs. They are roadmaps of our humanity. James Joyce once said about his novel Ulysses, to Frank Budgen, as they were walking together along the Universitätstrasse in Zurich in 1918: “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book.” And indeed the novel follows the Blooms and Dedalus from street to street, and from beach to bar to bedroom. But clearly this kind of information is not all that is being communicated by a work of fiction or poetry. Indeed, it could be argued that this sort of knowledge—the kind regularly imparted by a newspaper column or a search engine—is almost incidental to the real work of the poem, whose ultimate object is the education of the emotions.

The poet Mark Strand, who died this past November, once told Wallace Shawn in a Paris Review interview that “You don’t read poetry for the kind of truth that passes for truth in the workaday world. You don’t read a poem to find out how you get to Twenty-fourth Street.” In other words, poetic truth does not inhere ultimately in the denotative language of the poem. For facts, we have much more effective means of communication: the instruction manual, the brochure, the travel guide, or the public lecture. When Goethe takes “Poetry and Truth” as the title of his autobiography, what he is suggesting in part, I think, is that experience, in a work of art, may be rendered most clearly, and in a sense most truthfully, by attending to something beyond the verifiable facts. Fine, you might say, but doesn’t art, then, become, as Jacques Maritain wrote, “a world apart, closed, limited, absolute”—not the apprehension of reality but a replacement for reality, an illusion? This was a mote to trouble the mind’s eye of Plato.

A definition of poetry put forward by the poet Yvor Winters in his book Primitivism and Decadence (1937) sheds light on the question. A poem, Winters wrote, is a statement in words about a human experience—so far, so good, no?—a statement, he was quick to add, that pays particular attention to the connotative or emotional charge of language. Now, we all know where to find the denotative meaning of a word: we go to the dictionary. The connotative shades of a word, however, are harder to locate precisely. Take, for example, the word prison. The OED reports: “Originally: the condition of being kept in captivity or confinement; forcible deprivation
of personal liberty; imprisonment. Hence (now the usual sense): a place of incarceration.“ Clear, certainly, but a little dry. One could not say that this definition contains the complete meaning of the word.

Connotation communicates the emotions associated with a human experience. When we attend to the connotative or associative charge of prison, we think of, say, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum”: “A suffocating odour pervaded the prison! . . . I panted! I gasped for breath!” Or of Richard II in Pomfret Castle, only moments before his death: “I have been studying how I may compare/ This prison where I live unto the world. . . .” Or take Dante’s Ugolino, who, after his children have succumbed one by one to starvation in their shared prison, gives into his unspeakable hunger: “Then fasting,” he confesses, “had more power than grief.” Isolation, deprivation, dankness, threat. Connotation comprises all of the associations—visual, emotional, sonic—that have accrued to a word in all of its uses. The job of the poet is to manage or marshal these emotional charges of language as aptly as possible with regard to a specific experience.

For Winters, poetry—and, in its concision, lyric poetry, especially—is the highest linguistic form because, taken together, connotation and denotation compose the “total content” of language. It’s true that the two exist together in other kinds of writing, a novel, say, but poetry, by dint of its meters, lines, and highly wrought rhythms, modulates feeling with the greatest control. Connotation in poetry, then, acquires what Winters thinks of as a “moral” dimension. In order to render human experience truthfully, connotation or “feeling” must be precisely managed:

The artistic process is one of moral evaluation of human experience, by means of a technique which renders possible an evaluation more precise than any other. The poet tries to understand his experience in rational terms, to state his understanding, and simultaneously to state, by means of the feelings we attach to words, the kind and degree of emotion that should properly be motivated by this understanding.

The term “moral,” then, refers—at least in this instance—to a fairly technical process of selecting the best words in the best order for a given subject. “In so far as the rational statement is understandable and acceptable, and in so far as the feeling is properly motivated by the rational statement, the poem will be good,” he tells us.

Winters’s detractors—who feel that he, in his adherence to reason, quashes emotion in poetry—miss the point, I think. For Winters, emotion, expressed in the proper degree, is the whole ballgame. But this question of degree is crucial; if the feeling in a poem is either overstated or understated, the poem falls down. Excessive emotion, a form of sentimentality, obscures the experience under consideration, while the opposite of sentimentality—a kind of cold reportage—can also be a failure of evaluation. Understatement of the emotion robs experience of its humanity. The statement “Three prisoners were publicly executed in a detention center” crisply relates the facts, but in “The Shield of Achilles” Auden affords the reader some inkling of the
feelings involved:

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot

Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)

And sentries sweated for the day was hot:

A crowd of ordinary decent folk

Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke

As three pale figures were led forth and bound

To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The mass and majesty of this world, all

That carries weight and always weighs the same

Lay in the hands of others; they
We would not expect this sort of account from Anderson Cooper, but we should not accept anything less from our poets. As William Carlos Williams wrote famously, if somewhat blowzily, in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”:

“O what their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

It is difficult to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

But what, exactly, is found there?
And could one possibly die from the lack of it?

Poetry without music is a relatively recent development. A pronounced separation came around 1550, before which, Kirby-Smith notes, “the concept of a unified performance combining melody, words, and dance had never completely faded out.” The songlike cadence of poetry, in fact all of prosody, is in itself semantic and carries an emotional charge. Every syllable, every phoneme, is highly ordered in such a way as to communicate feeling.

It was this irrational, associative aspect of song that got the rhapsode Ion in trouble with Socrates. A rhapsode was a “stitcher-together of songs,” but his songs were not his own creation. They were the work of the poet, whose lines were divinely inspired:
For all good poets compose their beautiful poems [Socrates says] not by art but by inspiration and in a state of possession; and good composers of songs are not in their senses when they write their beautiful songs, but are just like Corybantes who are not in their senses when they dance. . . . For a poet is a light and winged and holy creature, and can not make poetry until he is inspired and is out of his senses and his reason is no longer in him; and until this comes to pass, no man can make poems or give forth oracles. For it is not by art that they make their many beautiful poems and speeches about things, . . . but by a divine dispensation each man can make a beautiful poem only about the single matter to which the Muse inspires him; . . . about all else he is incapable.

Did Plato, then, really intend to exclude most poets from his polity? It would seem so:

We can admit no poetry in our state save hymns to the gods and praises of famous men; for if the Muse of pleasure is admitted, in epic or in lyric verse, the place of law and of universally accepted reason will be usurped by pleasure and pain. In short, there has always been a quarrel between philosophy and poetry; so that the former judgment of exile passed against poetry is justified by the nature of poetry.

And yet Plato could possibly put up with poets, if they could somehow manage to pull their own weight, if poetry could prove “not only pleasant but useful.” Unfortunately, he says, poets may know how to make poems but otherwise they are “imitators of phantoms of virtue and of the other subjects of their making.” Homer may not be admitted as the great educator of mankind because his moral authority is in question.

The relation of truth to poetry remains fraught to this day. What truths can poetry tell us and what could its real-world use possibly be? W. H. Auden wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen.” He understood that no poem had saved a single Jew from death at the hands of the Nazis. Still, he believed in the necessity of action. “Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do,” he writes, “but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational moral choice.”

In this respect, the poet Anthony Hecht possessed one of the most compelling moral visions in late-twentieth-century American poetry. In “Dichtung und Wahrheit,” he juxtaposes a marble statue and a photo from World War II:

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The Discus Thrower’s marble heave,

Captured in mid-career,
seen from the distance of years, that photo—an actual photo of hecht's company—becomes drained of meaning, the expression inscrutable and impossible to read. what must he have been thinking all those years before?

that polished poise, that parian arm
sleeved only in the air,
vesalian musculature, white
as the mid-winter moon—
this, and the clumsy snapshot of
an infantry platoon,
those grubby and indifferent men,
lounging in bivouac,
their rifles aimless in their laps,
stop history in its tracks.

it needs a faust to animate
the wan homunculus,
construe the stark, unchanging text,
winkle the likes of us
out of a bleak geology
that art has put to rest,
and by a sacred discipline
give breath back to the past.
how, for example, shall i read
the expression on my face
among that company of men
If the documentary evidence, the photograph, does not contain the whole truth of experience, where, then, does the truth lie? The poem ends with this question in mind:

In that unlikely place?

We begin with the supreme donnée, the world,

Upon which every text is commentary,

And yet they play each other, the oak leaf cured

In sodden ditches of autumn darkly confirms

Our words; and by the frailest trifles

(A doubt, a whisper, and a handkerchief)

Venetian pearl and onyx are cast away.

It is, in the end, the solitary scholar

Who returns us to the freshness of
Hecht’s supreme donnée gets transformed in the poem from the *world* to the *word*, until art is as real or more real than the experience, a sentiment that recalls Nietzsche’s famous line from *The Birth of Tragedy*: “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”

Elsewhere in the poem, Hecht suggests that it’s “More difficult to know how the spirit learns/ Its scales, or the exact dimensions of fear,” an acknowledgment of the challenge posed by the education of the emotions through language. This challenge creates the underlying tension in Hecht’s most famous poem of the Holocaust, which takes its title from Goethe’s dying words, “More Light! More Light!”:

*The text,*

Which returns to us the freshness of the world

In which we find ourselves, like replicas,

Dazzled by glittering dawns, upon a stage.

Pentelic balconies give on the east;

The clouds are scrolled, bellied in apricot,

Adrift in pools of Scandinavian blue.

Light crisps the terraces of dolomite.

Enter The Prologue, who at once declares,

“We begin with the supreme donnée, the word.”

We move now to outside a German wood.

Three men are there commanded to dig a hole

In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down

And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.

A Luger settled back deeply in its glove.

He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.

The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.

When only the head was exposed the order came to dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.

When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
Hecht did not witness this scene at Buchenwald—it was not true for him in this sense—but takes it from a book by the historian and survivor Eugen Kogon. Even so, the scene resonates very directly with his own life. Hecht’s infantry company was present at the liberation of Flossenbürg at end of the war. As he later explained in an interview, Flossenbürg was both an extermination camp and a slave-labor 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 a 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 leveled against them, translating their denials or defenses 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.

How Hecht managed to preserve his sanity, how he managed to express his anguish to his family, and how he began, after the war, the fraught process of recovery had, incredibly, a great deal to do with his love of Shakespeare. As Hecht later told an audience at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington:

I had to leave college mid-career to join the army, and one of the few talismans I brought with me from civilian life to protect my spirit and sanity from the mindlessness of military training and overseas combat was a little paperback volume of Shakespeare plays.

In his letters home, Hecht put on a stoic, even jocular, aspect, despite severe and chronic depression. On one occasion, he dashed off a quick postcard to his family with a few lines remembered from As You Like It: “Sweet are the uses of adversity;/ Which, like the toad, ugly + venomous,/ Wears yet a precious jewel in his head[.] There is a marked paucity of jewels in my
toad—but I continue to search.” When in October 1944 Hecht was overcome by a “fit of abysmal despair,” he wrote to his own mother, Dorothea, the words Hamlet speaks to Gertrude: “I have that within me which passeth show/ These but the trappings + the suits of woe.”

At the end of the war, reading Shakespeare helped bring the traumatized Hecht back to himself:

I emerged from the war sound, and, if not sane, at least not stark raving mad, to no one’s astonishment more than my own. And the best index I think I had of the recovery of my balance, my humanity [remember the line “Much casual death had drained away their souls”], and my most valuable faculties, was the gradual recovery of the pleasure of reading Shakespeare. That pleasure has continued and grown richer ever since. I like to believe it has had a subtle and strengthening influence on my own poetry.

Hecht’s poetry about the war is filled with echoes of Shakespeare, including the poems in his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *The Hard Hours*, which includes “More Light! More Light!” *King Lear*, in particular, recurs throughout the collection. In April of 1978, Hecht wrote to the critic Ashley Brown that

[T]he tragic vision of *Lear* is actually present in *The Hard Hours*, in the final part of “Rites and Ceremonies.” The lines, in quotation marks,

“None does offend,
None, I say,
None”?

is Lear . . .

*Lear*, he tells Brown, also lurks in the interstices of other poems, such as “Behold the Lilies of the Field,” “Birdwatchers of America,” and “perhaps elsewhere.” One could add poems such as “Third Avenue in Sunlight,” and, importantly, “‘More Light! More Light!’ ”

*King Lear* is perhaps the most complete statement of negation that we have in English. Just run though some of the lines in your head: “Nothing will come of Nothing”; “Never. Never. Never. Never. Never. Never. Never”; “They could not, would not do ‘t”; “No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison”; and “No, no; no life?” Like so much of *Lear*, Hecht’s poem proceeds through negatives. The first *no* occurs early in the poem, placed in the mouth of an Elizabethan martyr, who has “made no crime.” Then, accompanying the first “nor,” comes another echo from *Lear*: the word *howl* repeats Lear’s howl at the death of Cordelia. The second scene in the poem, quoted above, constitutes a tightly woven pattern of negatives. Goethe’s emphatic dying words become:
Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared.

And, then, two stanzas later:

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.

The final image, again with an echo of Lear, is of sightless eyes:

and every day came mute
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

The survivors of the camps, as Hecht himself witnessed, were naked, skeletal, their yellowed skin stretched over bony frames. As one soldier from C Company reported: “Many had died with their eyes wide open staring into space as if they were seeing over and over again all the torture the Germans had put them through—their mouths open, gasping for that last breath that might keep them alive.” When a prisoner died, one of his fellows would carry his body to the stack of bodies beside the incinerator. The smell, he added, was unimaginable.

Raised in a largely secular household, Hecht’s experience of Judaism—a source of childhood shame in a climate of genteel anti-Semitism—changed significantly after the war: “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.”

As the poem reminds us through allusion, the scene takes place in the land of Goethe, the great man of Europe, an epitome of German culture, whose house became, after his death, a shrine for the hordes of his admirers. It was also the land of Hecht’s own great-grandparents. If the poem has a “use” in the sense that Plato intends, then perhaps it is that those “mute ghosts from the ovens” are not entirely silenced. Through Hecht’s poem, they instruct our emotions. To adopt Auden’s formulation, they extend our knowledge of good and evil, clarifying the nature of action, and leading us to a point where we can make a moral choice.

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