Visit With Eberhart

By WILLIAM PACKARD

IN April 1977, the National Book Award in Poetry was given to Richard Eberhart for his "Collected Poems: 1930-1976" (Oxford University Press).

In a sense the award also honored a career in which certain of Eberhart's poems have earned their way into our perpetual awareness—"The Groundhog," "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," "If I Could Only Live at the Pitch That Is Near Madness," "The Cancer Cells" and others. And Richard Eberhart's own career brought him into close association with almost all of the great major shaping figures of 20th-century poetry.

Born in 1904 in Austin, Minn., Richard Eberhart lives with his wife Betty in their home in Hanover, N.H., near the Dartmouth campus where he has been Professor Emeritus since 1970. There, in quiet sight of the Connecticut River, Richard Eberhart recently discussed his poetry:

Q. How would you describe your career as an American poet?

A. I've written poetry ever since I was about 16, and so the compulsion to write it must therefore be pretty deep. The poetry has been written through all these decades with varying fortunes.

It's curious that people have preconceived ideas about poetry or about what a poet is or should be or has been in other times. I don't see why they should have any a priori notion about what a poet is. For instance, when I went into the Navy in World War II, everybody said that will be the end of you, you'll never write another poem, how could you write a poem if you're going into the war? Well, as it turned out, I wrote about 25 poems in the war, and at least one of them has been very well known ever since, "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment." This poem couldn't possibly have been written if I hadn't gone to war.

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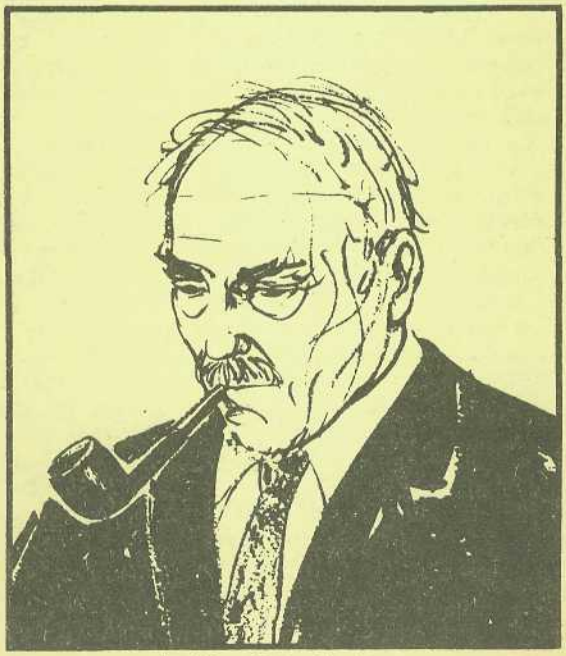

Richard Eberhart.

Then I went into business, for seven years after World War II, and everybody said, oh, you will never write a poem if you go into business, that will kill you off, how can you be a poet if you're going into business? But I found business very conducive to poetry because in business one is on a one-to-one relationship with what I think is the reality of American life. I wrote some of my best poems during that period, "The Horse Chestnut Tree," for instance.

Then my poetry got well enough known around the country so that I was invited into the academy in 1952 at the University of Washington, in Seattle. And it's interesting, once I got into teaching, nobody asked those questions. The assumption was that somehow the poet and the teacher went hand in hand. And of course it is true that in the academy you have the continuous pleasure of talking about the thing that means the most to you, to people who want to hear about it— there is a profound give and take between professors and other professors, poets and other poets, and professor-poets and students, about the art of poetry.

So my career has embraced many sorts of things.

Q. You've seen in the course of your lifetime several profound revolutions in poetry—from 1922, "The Waste Land," and then the post-World War II poets and then the so-called Renaissance of poetry in the past two decades—what do you feel about all these changes in the world of poetry?

A. Well, in the 1930's and 1940's we had the New Criticism, and everybody my age was delighted to read all that and know about it. We had John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate. I. A. Richards was at Harvard, and over in England we had F.R.Leavis and William Empson—Leavis was my tutor at Cambridge and Empson was my classmate and I. A. Richards was my friend and mentor. And then there was R. P. Blackmur who was a great friend of mine, and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

And all these wonderful people set up this arbitrary idea of the poem as an autonomous entity, and that to read a poem you didn't have to know the name of the author, you didn't have to know the biography, and you didn't have to know anything about its social nexus.

First, let me say the good things about all this. The New Criticism became an all-pervasive estimation of poetry for over two decades and I must say it did a great deal to elevate poetry in America. Because if you think of what happened *before* that, if you can even think back to the 1890's or the 1900's up til 1912 or so, when Frost and Eliot and Pound came on the scene—the critical situation was dismal and the taste was execrable. It was a very low period. So first, I want to say in retrospect that the New Criticism was a fine thing and it elevated the whole tone of the art.

However, I am very glad that we have inevitable changes in our mobile and quick changing society, because after a couple of decades, as everybody knows, people saw the limitations of this mode of apprehension of poetry, and it died a natural death. The theory of the well-made poem went out lock, stock and barrel, and all these fine fastidious distinctions of the Empsons of the world and the Blackmurs, were relegated to the past for study and contemplation.

Eberhart

And it seems to me the great change probably came during World War II, when a whole new group of thousands and thousands of young people started writing poetry, and they were doing it in an entirely different way. They wrote what I call a "spewed" poetry, that is they would spew out—and I don't mean that in a pejorative sense so much as in a sense of exuberance, they would write about anything under the sun instead of about classical subjects or more "poetic" subjects as in the time before, and they wrote long lines and they eschewed rhymes, and that's still more or less the way it is today.

I think that's still going on. I think it's splendid and I think the state of poetry in America is vigorous and healthy and exciting and very fine. And I think that compared with when I was starting to write in the 1930's—back then you could almost count the poets on your two hands, and the poet was an extreme individual, he was a very strange or odd kind of a person. There didn't seem to be any corporate sense. Now I have a feeling that when there are hundreds if not thousands of young people writing from the age of 15 to the age of 35, that they all take power from each other and they give power to each other and they don't have a sense of the loneliness of the writer so much as when I was there, nor the harshness of it.

Perhaps Hart Crane wouldn't have killed himself if he had just won the National Book Award, or if he'd been given a $10,000 prize called the Copernicus Award, or something—Otto Kahn gave him a thousand dollars and that saved his life for a couple of years and he went to Paris—and maybe he would have killed himself anyway.

But I think it's a better time to be a poet, nowadays.

Q. What do you feel about criticism today, are there any critics that you read with equanimity?

A. I don't think there is any school of critics such as the one I've mentioned —there are individuals here and there, but I can't see that there's any critical movement whatsoever, following Richards, Leavis, all those wonderful critics.

And I think criticism is essential to poetry, it always has been since the very beginning. First there are the professional critics, because after all they're the ones in the long run who determine the cast of the poetry of the time, and who actually make or break the reputations of poets. Even people who make up anthologies of poetry today can make or break names.

The second thing I'd say about criticism is that every poet is obviously a self-critic, and that's equally important with professional criticism—as a matter of fact it's more important to the poet himself, because the minute he writes a line, no matter under what theory, he has to evaluate his words in a cool, rational way and try to determine their excellence or fault.

Q. You once wrote about "The Groundhog" poem that "one looks at one's face in the glass and wonders on the eternal question of consciousness," as if it were a metaphysical wondering. Then when you were at St. Mark's School, you wrote "the duality between the cheery greeting and the monstrous evil in the world is not resolved."

A. I think there's a great difference between rationality and irrationality, or between all sorts of opposites, and I don't think I've ever gotten out of being a dualist—and I suppose that comes from some sort of split in the soul, I suppose Freud would have said before the age of 3, which has never been resolved, so that I always have two parts of my being, and poetry is somehow to lave this psychic wound. You're always trying to make yourself whole through poetry and maybe you never can.

Q. You once said that you never liked "The Groundhog" poem as much as it seems to be liked by some. Do you ever resent the popularity of some of your poems?

A. Way back 25 years ago, when I was known by only a few poems, I had a kind of despair that I would get to be known as a one-poem poet. "The Groundhog" was universally accepted and it was everywhere and Oscar Williams said that it was a great poem and he boasted to me that he reprinted it 25 times—he was crazy about it and so he spread it around. Now I've come to like it.

Q. You had written, in 1929, in a letter to your father, "Comprehensive life is the end." That's such an appealing statement, it could almost be used as the basis of criticism of whether some poets have been after this sense of comprehensiveness, or whether there's a certain narrowness in some careers?

A. Well, I like that idea—I don't remember writing that, it was so long ago, but what popped into my mind just know was that it's certainly better to be comprehensive than not comprehensive, so it must be good to take in more life than less, if you are able. But then it occurred to me that comprehensiveness leaves out the idea of evaluation. Presumably you might comprehend a great deal, but what would it mean, or what would you make of it? You see, you finally have to have some sort of values.

Q. In an early poem, you describe yourself as "some forgotten king / Who had a wonder-welling heart: / Richard Ghormley Eberhart." Would that description still stand?

A. That's in "The Bells of a Chinese Temple." Well, maybe it would stand, but in such a different way. Maybe I still have a wonder-welling heart but I certainly wouldn't say so now. I mean, that was a romantic early self-appraisal, it did for a man in his 20's, say, but if you're in your 50's or 60's or 70's,—I think once again you've got to have a more comprehensive view. Now maybe I still have a deep wonder about the universe, but I doubt if I'd use that word anymore; I'd use some other word . . .

Q. You've lived through five wars before you were 70. You have said that the last, the Vietam war, was the most hellish. "We loved to kill people we did not know and who did us no harm, for financial gain. We became masters of hatred and destruction." Yet you still have a fierce faith in our own democratic institutions, and you were not unhappy with all of the protest of the 1960's.

A. It was the strong protests of the youth of America that made the elders eventually stop their monstrous killing. Long praise to these vigorous young Americans who helped save our nation. Well, we belong to America—and aren't we lucky to have been born in America? It's the greatest experiment in 200 years. And what's the alternative? I don't see why any American shouldn't be happy to do whatever he can to make it work better. The alternatives are horrible to contemplate—the political systems of China, or Russia—do you want to be like that? I'm happy to be as democratic as you want to make me out to be! ■