

Talk — An Poem, I think

~~My grandmother said I was an atheist.
God said I was a man~~

- ***** OF a poet who seems to me to be neglected. Not that his books have not found admiring reviewers and devoted readers, but somehow he has not been "placed," you might say, in the scheme of things. When the lists are made out of those poets of the younger middle generation -- those who are now in the process of defining our time -- Jarrell, Lowell, Shapiro, Viereck, Schwartz, Robbke, etc -- this poet's name is often omitted. Yet Richard Eberhart -- for I am speaking of him -- is, I think, second to none of these, and superior to some, in the strength and seriousness and originality of his work.

I am almost tempted to say that his originality is the very quality that has stood in the way of a broader acceptance. He has always been a little outside the drift of fashion, just as he has been outside that anonymous, characterless, and conventional, academically poetical practice which fancies itself as the expression of the "tradition."

One element in Eberhart's originality is the willingness to confront quite directly the experience from which the poem comes. In looking through Eberhart's poems I am impressed by the opening line, or lines, of poem after poem.

~~My grandmother said I was an atheist.
God said I was a man~~

My grandmother said I was an atheist.
God said I was a man

I saw a querulous old man, the tobacconist of Eighth Street

Today I saw a picture of the cancer cells

Oedipus should have found exit from his dilemma

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
Would rouse God to relent

Whatever the experience may be -- situation, object, person, idea -- there is the peculiar directness, the nakedness, the innocence. But directness and innocence, in poetry as in life, can carry characteristic liabilities. The poem may be merely prosy, it may not get off the ground. And sometimes Eberhart's poems do stay quite flat-footed and lead-heeled. When they do succeed, however, we have the rare elation of seeing the very miracle before our eyes, the surge into the air, the process of the transformation of material into poem, of prose into poetry, of actuality into vision -- the moment of discovery.

Let us take a modest example of this process, the opening stanza of a poem called "Rumination"

Already it ~~has~~ happened,
Time telescoped on decay.
I remember my grandfather,
An aged man with a long white beard,
Who had been a Methodist minister all his life,
Shuffling along with his cane.
There was an infinite gentleness in his eyes,
And in his limbs his third paralytic stroke.
As a boy I used to take his hand,

So far all prose. Then poetry begins to stir:

The birds were bursting in the bushes,
The apple orchard drowned my senses in odor.

Then with the last line the miracle springs like a cat:

And even then I dreamed of the dream of time.

1 neglected
but

2 originality

3 content

4. material -> poem

5. example - "Purification"

6. Verse - not only type (poem)

7. moral answer - "of Call for"

And even then I dreamed of the dream of time,
 Then with the last line the miracle springs like a cat:
 The spade orchard crowned my senses in odor,
 The birds were purring in the bushes,
 So far all prose, then poetry begins to stir:
 As a boy I used to take his hand,
 And in his limbs his blind paralytic stroke,
 There was an infinite gentleness in his eyes,
 Shuffling along with his cane,
 Who had been a Methodist minister all his life,
 An aged man with a long white beard,
 I remember my grandfather,
 Time telescoped on decay,
 Already it had happened,
 Poor called "Purification"

Let us take a modest example of this process, the opening stanza of a
 prose into poetry, of actually into vision -- the moment of discovery.

we have the rare elation of seeing the very miracle before our eyes, the
 poems do say quite flat-footed and lead-heeled. When they do succeed, however,
 poem may be merely prosy. It may not get off the ground. Innocence, the
 Innocence, in poetry as in life, can carry characteristic capabilities. The
 the peculiar directness, the hazedness, the innocence, the directness and
 Whatever the experience may be -- situation, object, person, idea -- there is

... would I wish you to reflect
 ... You would think the fruit of aerial bombardment
 ... would I wish you to reflect
 ... You would think the fruit of aerial bombardment
 ... would I wish you to reflect
 ... You would think the fruit of aerial bombardment

And when that line comes, all the prosiness of the preceding part, suddenly glows with an inward illumination.

I have used the word vision above. Eberhart is a visionary poet. Not merely in that in lyrical moments he can suffuse the objects of the natural world with a glow of feeling, as in "Now is the Air Made of Chiming Balls"

Now is the air made of chiming balls.
 The stormcloud, wizened, has rolled its rind away.
 Now is the eye with hill and valley laved
 And the seeds assuaged, peep from the nested spray.
 The blue bird drops from a bough. The speckled meadowlark
 Springs in his lithe array. Fresh air
 Blesses the vanished tear; the bunched anguish.
 The laughing balls their joyful pleasure tear.
 Renewed is the whole world and the sun
 Begins to dress with warmth again every thing.
 The lettuce in pale burn; the burdock tightening;
 And naked necks of craning fledglings.

More characteristically, however the visionary quality comes from an ~~idea~~ idea -- the breaking through to an idea from the ruck of experience, and then with that release the burst of redeemed feeling.

Eberhart has several poems literally about this process -- "The Goal of Intellectual Man," "If I Could Live at the Pitch that is Near Madness," "Wading through the Thick Mud of Society." (Song and Idea p. 47)

With Eberhart that moment of vision is the "moral answer" -- the honest confrontation of the actual moment, ^{as the step to meaning} I should like to say how I think Eberhart's crabbed and cranky and sometimes precise and inspired style -- an honesty with language that will not cheat with the "poetical" effect -- is related to this. An honesty that reminds us of Hardy. ~~But if we mention Hardy~~ But if we mention Hardy, we must mention Blake, too, for he, I suppose, is Eberhart's other ancestor. And I suppose that they would understand how Eberhart is hammering out his own poetic salvation.