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MEREDITH, Jr., William Morris

William Meredith, *The Art of Poetry* No.34 Interviewed by Edward Hirsch



William Meredith lives in Uncasville, Connecticut, just outside of New London, in a rustic nineteenth-century barn that he converted into a house a number of years ago. For many years, he lived about fifty yards away in a large house that stands on the wooded property, but he eventually sold it to friends and moved into a smaller space. He likes to say that he originally bought the property—which overlooks the Thames, the river that figures in so many of his most characteristic poems—in order to keep himself rooted. “I knew that I had found a wonderful place to live and work at Connecticut College and I wanted to keep myself from leaving.” Although he recently retired from teaching, Meredith has been associated with Connecticut College since

1955, where, over the years, he has clearly been well taken care of by both colleagues and friends.

Meredith was born in New York City in 1919, graduated from Princeton University in 1940, and served as a naval aviator during the Second World War and the Korean conflict. He has published seven books of poems: *Love Letter from an Impossible Land* (which was chosen by Archibald MacLeish in 1944 for the Yale Series of Younger Poets), *Ships and Other Figures* (1948), *The Open Sea and Other Poems* (1958), *The Wreck of the Thresher and Other Poems* (1964), *Earth Walk: New and Selected Poems* (1970), *Hazard, the Painter* (1975), and *The Cheer* (1980). He has also translated a volume of Apollinaire’s poems and is currently co-editing a book of Bulgarian translations. Since 1964, he has been a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and from 1978 to 1980 he was the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. In 1984, he was awarded one of the first Senior Fellowships of the National Endowment of the Arts.

On the day of the interview, a spring morning in 1983, Meredith was wearing a soft, bone-colored V-neck sweater with an open collar and brown corduroy pants. He looked decidedly nonprofessorial—casual enough to work in the garden, but also turned-out enough to sit and have cocktails with friends. The interview was conducted around a kitchen table in the dining area downstairs. It had poured the previous day, and there was still some evidence of moisture on the stone floor. Meredith seemed a little tired—he had suffered a major heart attack about a year before—but otherwise very much himself. Everything he says is informed by a sharp intelligence, a sly wit, a deep modesty, and a complex optimism. We overheard him tell a close friend on the telephone that morning, “We’re in bad health, but high spirits.”

INTERVIEWER

You’ve said that you average about six poems per year. Why so few?

WILLIAM MEREDITH

Why so many? Ask any reviewer. I remember a particularly wicked review of Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose new poems weren't as good as they should have been, "This Millay seems to have gone out of her way to write another book of poems." You're always afraid of that. That could be said, I believe, of certain people's poems. So I wait until the poems seem to be addressed not to "Occupant" but to "William Meredith." And it doesn't happen a lot. I think if I had a great deal more time it would happen more often because I would get immediately to the typewriter. But it might happen eight times a year instead of six—not much more than that. I'll say this because it may be interesting or important: I think it is because poetry and experience should have an exact ratio. Astonishing experience doesn't happen very often. Daily experience is astonishing on a level at which you can write a poem, but astonishing experience would be the experience that is not astonishment of reality but astonishment of insight. It is for me, as a lyric poet, to make poems only out of insights that I encounter. Robert Frost used to say, "How many things have to happen to you before something occurs to you?"

INTERVIEWER

How do you usually start a poem?

MEREDITH

It starts with an insight which gets a few words close to the ground and then the words begin to make specific the insight. Once they start growing the words are seminal—I suppose it's like the bacteria of a growth. I can hardly remember a poem in which the words are not *particular* words, often very bleak, simple words. Once they are put down they are able to focus an idea. I have, I think, only once written a poem—and it's not a very good poem—which came to me literally as a dream that was decodable. It's about an eight or ten line poem and all I could say was, "That's what it said."

INTERVIEWER

Your poems tend to have a sly, angular way of going at a subject, approaching it from the side rather than directly. Would you say something about that?

MEREDITH

If it's so, it's the nature of the work that a poem is getting at something mysterious, which no amount of staring at straight-on has ever solved, something like death or love or treachery or beauty. And we keep doing this corner-of-the-eye thing. I remember when we were in training to be night fliers in the Navy, I learned, very strangely, that the rods of the eye perceive things at night in the corner of the eye that we can't see straight ahead. That's not a bad metaphor for the vision of art. You don't stare at the mystery, but you *can* see things out of the corner of your eye that you were supposed to see.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that writing a poem is a specific engagement of a mystery?

MEREDITH

I would say exactly that. It is the engagement of a mystery that has forced itself to the point where you feel honor-bound to see this mystery with the brilliance of a vision. Not to solve it, but to see it.

INTERVIEWER

Does this relate to the statement in your poem "In Memory of Robert Frost," that Frost insisted on paying attention "until you at least told him an interesting lie"?

MEREDITH

Well, he understood—and I'm afraid his biographer, Lawrence Thompson, does not understand—that at the higher reaches of our experience we don't know the things that we say, but we say that we do. That's the ultimate

artistic lie. I tell you what I know today in a poem and I don't know it; in the first place it may not be true, and in the second place it may not be what I know tomorrow. Artistic truth is to declare, under torture, what the torturer does not want you to say, not what the torturer does want you to say. You try to tell the truth even though it's uncomfortable for everybody. When the hippies were talking about how the only two things you need to know about life is that you must love one another and not lie, they forgot to tell you that those are the only two really difficult things. We all know that's what we're supposed to do; it's much harder to love people than anybody ever tells you and it's much harder to tell the truth. Poets are professionally committed to telling the truth, and *how* do they tell the truth? They say something that isn't true. This is the slyness of art: If you tell enough lies, you're bound to say something true. I think my work is only as good as it is honest but as a data bank it's full of errors.

INTERVIEWER

Is it fair to characterize *The Cheer* as a work of sly survivals, a resolutely hopeful book?

MEREDITH

A resolutely hopeful book I think it is. The question of survival, in fact the process of survival, is something that either occurs or doesn't occur. It doesn't seem to be something that one deliberately does, but is a product of good instincts and good life. And quite right. Survival, in terms of the poems, has been such that I use them for making my way from one form of commitment to the next. I hope that the poems will lead me more directly to where I'm going and that I'll arrive directed only by instincts, social instincts.

INTERVIEWER

In a memorial poem to John Berryman, "In Loving Memory of the Late Author of Dream Songs," you write that "Morale is what I think about all the time / now, what hopeful men and women can say and do." Why morale?

MEREDITH

I suppose it seems to me that the priestly function of artists in a society is to administer spiritual vision and that the obvious deficiency of a fragmented and confused society is in confidence. I use morale partly in quotation marks because I first became aware of the word in the military. Muriel Rukeyser pointed out to me that there was a certain General Euleo whose title was "Chief of Morale" and we thought that very funny. I was in the Navy so long that I have to remind myself that's a humorous title. But like General Euleo, I see the need for keeping the morale of the troops high. At one point it was in the papers that Congress had discovered large shipments of dice were being made to the troops overseas, and General Euleo explained that they were parts of a Parcheesi set they had not been able to requisition and that the whole thing would keep morale high. That's like *The Cheer*. My real concern is, in the first place, that we ought not to be solemn and, in the second place, the response to disaster, even cultural disaster, is an impersonal one and the personal obligation is to mental and spiritual health. Of course, it always has been.

INTERVIEWER

In "Hazard's Optimism" you also note that Hazard is "in charge of morale in a morbid time." Is that one of the poet's responsibilities?

MEREDITH

I would suppose so. In a happy time, like Elizabethan England, the poet is probably involved in reminding people that they're all going to come to a bad end. Nowadays, you try to keep people from precipitating their own bad ends.

(The interview continues, but is only available to subscribers.)