Chapter – V

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THE FUTILITY OF DEATH

Metaphysical overtones in Eberhart's treatment of death portrays how the poet transcends the physical and manifests the metaphysical considerations of death. In fact the earliest themes for poetry have been love, war and religion and they continue to have the same fascination in this televised and jetted age (Engel 150). But one finds recognisably noteworthy changes in mankind's attitude towards war, the nature of war and its aftermath. Participation in the war efforts has ceased to be a question of patriotism. It was once a trumpet call to evince one's heroism. Getting wounded was a brand of glory and the indelible sears manifested in one's sense of sacrifice. Homer, Virgil, Milton and other great epic writers glorified their heroes, advocated admirable and emulatory virtues like unconquerable, will and the courage never to submit or yield.

In modern times the possession of nuclear bombs and other deadly weapons make war more disastrous, devastating and widespread. War originates from brutality and results in
frustration and aimlessness. Eberhart, the sensitive poet, is constantly troubled by mortality and brevity of life and time. When he is very easily moved at the sight of dead animals and insects, the scene of mass human massacre and wasteful butchery in war would not have left its uneasy stir in vain. His anti-war poems are closely and most delicately interwoven with his major theme mortality.

During his tenure as the Theoretical Gunnery Instructor at the World War II, he had witnessed the monstrous killings with his own eyes. Besides the outside influence, the incentive to write war poetry was innate and ran in the family. Eberhart's maternal uncle Henry Bolk Lowenstein, a prolific writer of magazine verse - dealt mostly with military and patriotic themes.

In response to his humanitarian urge, he always resists cruelty, tyranny and annihilation. He believes in the possibility of just wars and unjust wars. II war is a threat to good life and security, it is always to be defied. He felt that the belated entry of the Americans into the field during II World War was necessitated. It was a means of defence to subdue and check Adolf Hitler, the classic tyrant's anti-social and unhumanitarian brutality. It is Eberhart's conviction that poetry lies a social function and cultural significance.
Writing about wars he opines in his *Sixty Dartmouth* Poems:

Brutes and barbarians kill each other with little thought. Machiavellians may kill each other with subtle thought. But I do not know one poet today who condones killing and who believes in the Vietnam War.

(Richard Eberhart n.p.)

It might sound a little paradoxical and ironic for a gunnery instructor to stand totally opposed to wars. But fundamentally he is an anti-warmonger, believer in non-violence and proclaims his avowed faith in pacifism. This is a vindication of high admiration for Buddha and his teachings: "I think I had Buddha as my hero for a long time" (*PP* 271). This pacifist attitude of Eberhart is an attempt to conquer nihilism and emptiness in life. His generalised pacifism is devoid of political undertones. He reads his pacifist philosophy even in the eyes of a cow:

Their mild eyes are meant to teach constancy
To your impetuous and erratic restlessness.

.................

The eye of a cow is a picture of sufferece.
The whole attitude of the animal is gentle.
It has learned the lesson of the pacifist
And by not lighting back has not been destroyed.

(Hun Oaks: The Barn)

For the sake of convenience and for the purpose of
discussion, the anti-war tendency which runs parallel to his
mortality theme, can be considered under these headings:
appalling horror, echoes common and prevalent idea of war and
war experiences: Conspicuous waste, voices that might be
termed as the attitude of an intellectualist and a social thinker
and finally the disgusted philosophers and moralists attitude is
discernible in the disrelation of the spiritual.

The Second World War, the nastiest of the World Wars is
equally deadly and destructive in its impact upon humanity.
Being stationed in the Naval Base during war time, his subject
matter for poetry whatever may be, regarding war, falls within
his purview. The mental agony and the physical ugliness that
encompassed the people are indescribable. The psychological
depression has led to weakness of body and spirit, illusion,
feeling of insecurity, restlessness and despair.
The poem entitled "World War by deliberate omission of the definite article in the title, does not particularise any war but generally presents the monstrosity associated with war. Recognition of the depth of evil that lurks behind the unjust wars and the atrocities committed, drives the poet to create two contrasting pictures in this short piece, contrast of the delights to peace with horrors of war (Engel 71).

The opening lines of the poem "World War" are arresting. The mellifluous How of the first three stanzas depict a world of delight, happiness, serenity and peace - the legacy or boon one enjoys in the absence of war. The last three stanzas run counter to the list hyper wonderful scene, mirroring the panic that results from war. The sound effects and the matching of melodious and musical words which evidence the obvious influence of Tennyson in the first section are superbly done. The use of sibilants, nasals, soft consonants, identical sound beginning in glorious glide and glade; willow, winding, weather, the profuse use of the consonant to suggest liquid. How the pairing of suggestive epithets and descriptive nouns create the melodic effect. There is clarity, simplicity, precision, vigour and above all instances of what Pope advocated in "Easay on Criticism": "the sound must seem an echoe to the sense."
All three elements of poetic beauty - sound, image and form-contribute to the total effects of the poem. No noun is without the appropriately qualifying adjective. The supremely wonderful scene as a contrast to the most appalling scene in the next section is juxtaposed. There is no yesterday in the happy atmosphere but only promising tomorrows and lovely undulant today:

Temble air with never yesterday, Grasay twirling boyloot triumphing, Budding bough drops lovely lording, Pearling euckoobrook cool ecstasy,

(CP: 1960 96)

It is the world of mellow mist closely interwoven with lucid sunny nest, promising everlasting pleasures:

Woven from lucid sunny nest.
World of mellow willow mist.
Now for ever pleasures piping.
Honey stipple body wonderful.

(CP: 1960 96)

The calm, unobtrusive scene of wonder is interrupted by cumulation of exclamatory words announcing the impending and imminent horror at the advent of war. The once prevailed peace and tranquillity are miserably substituted fry horror and terror:
Strike down, better: shatter: Splinter:
Destroy: fracture: cripple: butcher:
Knock: beat: whack: cull:
Ruin: gash: Smash: blast:

(CP: 1960 96-97)

The eruption is sulphuric with hard tooth breaking consonants which jar the ears and violate the tranquillity that prevailed over there once. Series of abruptly stressed words are appropriate to the description. The harsh rhythm suggests the feeling of fright and hopelessness. The narrator's heart is volcanic and is in keeping with his emotional eruption. It is most curiously and subtly brought out. The second picture most carefully drawn is about ferocity, depravity, wickedness and savagery that ensue from war. The ugliness of the act of killing, brutality of amputation of organs, and the dehumanising, regimentation are the effects of war. Bernard F. Engel's suggestion, that the brutalisation of war in words capitalized, imply merely the newspaper headings may partially be accepted because they serve a greater function than that by suggesting and intensifying the most frightening pictures and the dreadful consequences. The authoritative and realistic details, telling metaphors and allusions to the use of newspaper scar-heads,
and deliberate intrusion of inverted syntactical order (verb-noun order) mirror the ugliness and horror most successfully:

Howls the Whirlwing Over the Word,
Tempests Quaking Shake the World.
The Earthquake Opens Abrupt the World,
Cold Dreadful Mass Destruction.

*(CP: 1960 97)*

The image of vegetative decay and natural calamity culminate in the first three lines with the identical word ending World. The final line closes with three-powerfully qualified adjectives "Cold Dreadful Mass" to capacitate the noun Destruction, a word suggestive of warning, is meant to be a serious threat to the world. The poet communicates his own sense of outrage at the parade of death during war.

"The World War" deals with horrors that overpower the world, whereas "Brotherhood of Men" describes most realistically and graphically the honors the soldiers experience at war front and in refugee camps. After a long period of service and experience, the narrator, a veteran soldier of the American surrender at Corregidor in 1942. arrives at the philosophical insights that it is during periods of trial when one passes through the valley of suffering and tribulation, that one deals better and more directly with one’s fellowmen.
War brings men to the most dehumanising and degraded animality. They are caged like animals in the camps. Their behaviour at times, though disgusting and sickening, is deeply affecting and heartrending:

Madness was manifest, infernal the struggle,
Urine was drunk by many, rampant was chaos,
Came wild men at each other, held oft attackers,
Some slit the throats of the dead.
Drank the blood outright, howled wailing,
Slit the wrists of the living, others
With knives or with fangs ravenous,
I saw them drinking the blood of victims.
Hell I was in, this was immitigable Hell.

(CP: 1986 100-101)

The biting wind during winter season is more fiendish and nature adds to the cruelty:

Slept with diseased brothers to keep off the cold.
Low was language, life left us slowly.
Some sank into states of sodden trance.
Longing to lie in cold bed and to die.
Weary of spirit, would not wake, will-less.

(CP: 1986 103)
The sense of alienation and separation are co-intriguers with war. When the surviving soldier returns, there is a passage of deeply touching pathos and tenderness:

Rings I have, watches, tokens, a dog tag
To take back to the land of the living,
From the dead to deliver to fathers or sisters,
Cherished possessions of my luckless companions
Lost in four years of rooted abuse.

(CP: 1986 105)

So the tired soldier decides, never to kill a living being, (but always) to live for love, the lost country of man’s longing. When there is so much of appalling horror around. he passively accepts human limitations when perfection becomes Impossible, So he scan Ins for some kind of commitment, compensations or remedy. Eberhart’s remedy for modern malady is based on generalised love and echoes what Christ said: "A new commandment I give unto you, that he love one another"; (John 13:34). Though Eberhart repeatedly echoes the new covenant, he does not emphasise the great significance and weight of the Christian doctrine.

Natural calamities like earthquake Hood, volcanic eruptions, accidents act as furies and bring about colossal waste - both material and non-material. Probably they are God’s
agents, providentially sent and cannot be averted. But waging a war is solely the contrivance of man; it is born and bred in his treacherous mind and can easily be prevented. It entails material waste, economic and social disaster, above all, annihilation of human life. Despair, forlornness, alienation, separation and bereavement are the sad remains. Eberhart is perturbed primarily at the loss of human life.

The poem. "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" gains its significance as it describes the poet's keen observation of the war scene and the report of the names of his deceased students published in papers. It is a severe lash on man's megalomaniac interest in his purposeless endeavour which results in early death, disaster, deprivation, ruthlessness and senselessness. The composition of the poem is during the second world war. As a Navy Aerial Gunnery instructor and as a Naval Reserve Officer during wartime, he was assigned the task of teaching thousands of young men, the use and the operation of the machine guns.

The first three stanzas were composed immediately after the initial, thought and he resumed his composition of the last stanza after two weeks or so. The inclusion of the final quatrain gives a sense of immediacy and human touch which the poem
would have lacked otherwise. The poem opens with the most striking assumption people usually cherish, but it is wrong, the poet says in a good humoured tone:

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

(CP: 1960 90)

But God would not be enraged to relent or would not soften down in his attitude towards humanity because man's treachery is beyond imagination. God in his indifference would never intervene but permit such cruelty to persist. Even the infinite spaces are shocked at an all-embracing ruthlessness; and history, the accumulator of experienced knowledge is also defenceless.

It is a wrong supposition to dream that after witnessing all these atrocities, God would infuse in man a little sense of realisation and repentence and cause him to regret. But man is more murderous and varied in his purpose of slaughter than Cain, the first murderer. The narrator regrets that education and scientific advancement have not refined man's attitude towards war but he is still more persistent and murderous in his original fury. So the education and the so-called advancement mean nothing. Entailed with a kind of beastliness, he slaughters his own brethren for no reason at all.
The narrator puzzles the readers with eternal questions always asked, when man is bewildered to see purposeless mass massacre:

Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?
Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?
Is the eternal truth man’s lighting soul
Wherein the Beast ravens in its own avidity?

(

Finding no answers, he turns to specific references, the names of individuals whose names as an instructor, he remembers but, cannot recall their faces.

The poem would not have attained, its popularity, if Eberhart had recorded his impression in the first three quatrains and left it like that. The fourth stanza localizes the tragedy to a smaller circumference. It is spiced with a touch of immediacy and intimacy. The tone of the poem changes from a rhetorical generalisation to a particular elegiac one. The two boys are no doubt insignificant (faceless) and unremembered except by their names, but they are the inheritors and prey of human waste and destruction. The whole of humanity is
indirectly impeached for the purposeless waste and aimless fighting. Suddenly from the universal he comes to the particular; exactly contrary to the movement one finds in "The Groundhog" and For a Lamb".

The final stanza renders some textual difficulties. It fuses the tragic theme of early death with 'Late in School". The phrase 'late in school may literally stand for their truant nature, hence late in school. The deeper significance and more universalized implication is that; in the school of life, only lately or recently they are aware of the differences between life and death, or they come to late consciousness about the devastating tragedy. When such a realisation dawns upon, it is too late already.

The 'belt feed lever' and the 'belt holding pawl', the two technical references, need detailed explanation in order to enhance the theme they qualify. The webbed (woven) belt of a machine gun, carrying the cartridges is operated by a lever. The wheel and pawl regulate the release of the cartridges at the right time. The 'belt feed lever signifies life as it only carries the cartridges and the second phrase 'belt holding pawl' denotes death as it releases the cartridges and brings death. Death implication is more obviously intensified by the suggestion of
pawl wheel - which is a lowering device used to let the coffin go down. So the term death holding pawl conveys both death and burial (doe Allen Bradham 71).

In schools the children are taught the differences between constructive and destructive elements. Similarly in the school of life the young men learn the differences between the elements of life (suggested by Iced) and that of death (pawl). This marks the ambiguity in life. The pathos and the tragic irony is so much deepened when one learns that the boys who learnt to operate the guns have been victimized by their own weapons. There is also the other side of killing - being killed. There is a grim poetic justice in their death. Death may overpower not only the targets of the deadly weapons but also those who operate it. They have fallen into their own pit and have been preyed by their own devices.

He ruminates upon the weight of the modern technical savagery, and on modern civilization. Is man to be condemned for his murderous design which runs deep in his blood? As men are the heirs of Adam’s original lapse, are they to be passive about the slaughterous intent, inherited from Cain? The poet leaves these puzzling questions without any explicit and satisfactory conclusions. There is a note of sighing and despair in the last two lines:
But they are gone to early death, who late in school
Distinguished the belt feed lever from the belt
holding pawl.

(CP: 1960 90)

The poem is an expression of the cynical, pessimistic and disillusioned point of view. The emphatic significance on the early life, the prime of their youth is mentioned. Their lives unavailed are sheer waste and of no help to anybody. The skillful use of martial terminology is in keeping with the theme and treatment, indicative of early death and burial.

The reflections upon devastating and conspicuous waste do not ensue from war alone but it might institute from man’s malice and spite of which is inexplicable by any standard. To cite an example, this is convincingly illustrated in the analysis of Oswald’s psychology. The assassination of President Kennedy, which is a conspicuous waste and prodigious loss to the great nation, is motivated only by vicious and rancourous thoughts. It eventually culminates in neither psychological nor personal satisfaction for the assassin. There is no beneficial outcome to promote social or political cause of the nation.
"The Killer" treats the 1960s current event of immediate interest which has convulsed the world in loss. It is given an imaginative presentation here. It gives rise to the psychological insight into the character of the killer, the personification of motiveless malignity. It is a kind of an interior monologue. He reflects upon his action after death. He feels that he must have been instigated to killing, by lack of love. The poem is too preachy to be a convincing presentation of Lee Harvey Oswald's psychology, but it is demonstrative by implication some of Eberhart's own values. (Engel 147).

The imaginative web it weaves around, creates an occasion for the author as well as for the speaker to pay a glowing tribute to the President, who was the clean American, the most uncorruptible personality. The character of the speaker is cleverly portrayed because the monologue is self revelatory in nature. "I am of Satan", and his capital punishment, came back in such satanic style, His vileness is deep and he is the expression of evil will. He comments on the insincerity of love to which he Is the victim:

Love left me. No love was true; but he is paid back in his own coin: The bullet that shocked a nation came back to bring my own annihilation. He appears to be a fatalist. My fate is to have been sent. To kill my own and President. He wonders how
self begotten hatred swiftly begets hatred, monstrous hatred, lurking in man's subconscious, explodes one day. Such a resentment motivated action is identical with suicide "To kill my own". The murderous intention results not only in the loss of the insignificant nonentities of the "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" but also leads to the conspicuous waste of the most renowned pacifist and illustrious President.

A Young Greek, killed in the War describes (he loss of life which is an inevitable waste in the wars. The identity of the soldier is dubious, hence he may stand for any soldier who, as a matter of fact, is given an unsentimental and customary burial. Though the soldier dies faceless like Van Wettering and Averill in the Fury, they are at least remembered by their names, but the Greek soldier is a nobody and signifies only a cipher. The poem describes death, burial and the narrators impressions upon the act. It imitates the elegiac pattern which provides the medium for some of Eberhart's observations on death. It is sad to note that the hero is not immortalised as they were used to be in the earlier days.

The first stanza describes graphically the details related to the burial; pouring wine out, and soaking the tunic reflect the customs of the Greek, may be as the preservative. The dry Attic
Air corresponds to the dryness of heart of those who perform the ceremony. Their indifference, unconcern and unsentimentality are emphasised by suggestions like the shallow grave they dig and the way they threw him to a grave.

Having watched the ceremony, the observer is moved by the music that floats in the spring airs; the season described, contradicts the situation presented. The poet strongly believes in the co-existence of tragedy and comedy, laughter and weeping, grief and joy and distress and pleasure as part of reality. The mind makes its rugged testaments. Melancholy is both preservative and predatory, a duality, like that of Shelley’s West Wind. There is a note of sad and puzzled tenderness:

The light is a container of treachery,
The light is the preserver of the Parthenon.
The light is lost from that young eye.
Hearing music, It speak, least he should die.

(CP: 1960 181)

The last stanza, with identical beginning in the first three lines, reiterates the theme of loss and waste. The light which is so promising in youth is deceptive because it has been deprived of life and existence. Parthenon literally stands for the Temple of Athene, the Goddess of wisdom and learning. The light is the preserver of the Parthenon which may stand for the intellectual
potentiality which is never fully exercised in the departed. If the etymology of the word is traced, the Greek word 'Parthanos' signifies a virgin. The soldier must have died early as a bachelor hence issueless. The narrator bemoans the loss of light which ought to have been the proof of high and heroic undertakings, the light which ought to have been the seal of learning, the temple of Athene; and the light which ought to begel and establish a progeny, has been eclipsed and obscured. Though the loss seems insignificant, it is sheer waste and most characteristically accomplished by war.

The best poem of Eberhart's war poems is probably "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment". Its beginning is very general, in rhetorical terms and ends with a note which jars the reader:

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
Would rouse God to relent; the infinite spaces
Are still silent. He looks on shock-pried faces.
History, even, does not know what is meant.
You would feel that after so many centuries
God would give man to repent; Yet he* can kill
As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
He further advanced than in his ancient furies.
Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?
Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?
Is the eternal truth man's fighting soul
Where in the Beast ravens in its own avidity?
Of Van Wettering I speak, and Averill.
Names on a list, whose laces I do not recall
But they are gone to early death, who late in school
Distinguished the belt feed lever from the belt holding pawl.

(CP: 1986 90)

In stanza four, the address suddenly changes from a rhetoric to an elegy for two boys named Van Wettering and Averill, boys who sought no universal meaning but simply distinguished the belt-feed-lever from the belt holding-pawl and died of their schooling into the anonymities of fate. They are not even faces; they are names on a list. John Ciardi's comment on this poem is praiseworthy.

The only point at which they touch larger significance is that they are gone to early death. Thus, they are unknowing heirs to all human waste. Their death is their one real illustration of the universal questions the poem begins with. Yet the implication is clear that their death is both man's tragedy and failure. The boys are the least of mankind, the more so that these who die are so insignificant.
It is this willingness to "accuse all of mankind" that gives power to Eberhart's writing. A poem that illustrates this point is titled "On Shooting Particles Beyond the World."

It is about the atomic bomb. The heading of the poem is a newspaper quotation in which an authority is cited as saying that the end of it all will be the blowing up of ourselves. The author makes man's discontent - a frustration that arises from having to limit war to earth. Now man attempts to send the effects of his sickness to the very heavens. "Good Bye man! your Vornivorium". This is followed by a verse which reads:

The atom bomb accepted this world.
Its hatred of man blew death in his lace.
But not content, he '11 slugs beyond.
His particles of intellect will spit on the sun.

(CP: 1960 130)

The final four lines tell us that it is not God who will be found "in the mystery of space" - far from it. as man "flaunts his own out-caste state." Man will instead discover the opposite of God, his own "shout (hat gives a hissing sound).

Man, through his invention of mass destructive weapons, is scored in another poem, "Aesthetics After War". The poet writes of seeing:
That gigantic, surrealistic, picture - mushroom
And objectification of megalomania.
A world of men who butcher men
In the arsenical best interest of several states
The modern warring maniacal man.

(CP: 1986 124)

It is indeed a man who perpetrates war. However, it is a madness far removed from that in the poem "If I Could Only Live at the Pitch that is Near Madness" in which the violence and vividness of childhood become material for nostalgia. Replying to an interview's question, Eberhart himself makes the distinction; "It's good to be at the pitch that is near madness. That's when you are nearest to the divine insight. The war experience had fury, but this is the objective fury of destructiveness".

One meaning of war is death and Eberhart emphasizes this meaning. However, his concern with death goes beyond war in his work. We could expect this of a person who at eighteen, "participated" in the lineage ring death of his mother. There is no way, of course, to pinpoint how or why the subject of death should attract Eberhart any more than it attracts any other human being. Eberhart is interested in the fascination of death, common to poets.
"You will notice that in the history of English poetry there have been more great poems about death than there have been about birth... Isn't it interesting that, for instance, birth is positive, life-giving, death is negative and life-taking, and yet death transports the imagination of a poet much more than birth".

What death means, in Eberhart's poetry, is an inexplicable mystery. Eberhart's great honesty is that his poems confront this mystery on its own terms, reserving for themselves only the equal mystery of life's sweet vitality.

Eberhart can use "any excuse" to mediate or speculate on death. It could be the demise of a soldier, a visit to a cemetery, the death of an animal. Some of the titles of his poems will themselves reveal his interest in death. The following poems are found in "Grave Piece",

"I walked out to the Grave yard to see the Dear"
"I walked over the Grave of Henry James" and
Sometimes the longing for death"

(CP:1986 202)

Eberhart's poem "Am I My Neighbours Keeper?" was written on January 5, 1962. He was motivated by a newspaper cutting that he had read to compose the poem. Originally it was not
conceived as a sonnet but later on it became one. It is a tragic poem of the murdered man. Ironically the protagonist is his neighbours keeper. The pradox of death keeps the idea alive.

Lines from Eberhart's poems will illustrate the meaning of Mill's insights. In "The Longing for Death" we read the suggestion of death as "New life, painful no more, where hope doesn't need to deter us". In "Rumination" there is the hopeful idea that death will "below be regarded as a process of purification" in the poem "In a Hard Intellectual Light". Yet one more example is found in Grave piece, where we read "And through Death we try to reach perfection"; Thus, while death is an ultimate mystery for Eberhart, it is not the only mystery for him. He goes on to examine the mysterious "Clawing" and 'cancerous' nature of death.

In a separate essay, Mills makes an observation that seems exact to the "The Groundhog" as well as the other poems. A sensitivity to death, to its eruption in the midst of a full existence, haunts Eberhart's poetry and stems, at least partially, from this bitter childhood circumstance of witnessing his mother's death. We never find in the poems a fear of death as such. Sometimes it seems merely an intrusion of the visionary
poems. Eberhart attempts to project himself the boundaries of life, with differing effects. He has adjusted to the idea of death without succumbing to the sort of observation with extinction that fills the atmosphere of Dylan Thomas' poetry.