Chapter – VIII

Meditation on Life and Death
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MEDITATION ON LIFE AND DEATH

Some of the poems of Eberhart deal with real death, natural death, death as it is limited to this world or death as it is conceived in terms of physique and some also treat death experiences alter the physique. There are numerous poems tending to fall into this group. To assert that each poem embraces a distinct and individual concept of death may be an exaggerated statement, but it is clear as crystal, that they are expansive, individualistic and varied in content, thought and treatment. To comprehend them in one group the term Metaphysics, offers a sale niche. Eberhart’s empirical psychology, deep concern with death and ultimate reality imaginary after physique experiences and philosophical speculations on death naturally designate the title. When this metaphysical vein of contemplation is occasioned by a particular experience and articulated in language as clear as the realisation it embodies, he writes at his characteristic best, in love of life and fear of loss and hope of holding something against destruction (Daniel Hoffman 79). He appears to be an autodidact in many of his
poems, like the one who goes through the school of any kind of anxiety to faith by his own endeavour and at times professes to be a semi-edidact, administering the doctrine of cosmic love to be the reliever from all anxieties about transitoriness and death.

T.S. Eliot, the Literary Crusader of modern times, in his famous essay "The Metaphysical Poets", expresses the difficulty in defining the term Metaphysical. "Not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry but difficult to decide what poets practice it." (T.S. Eliot 303). After the great revival of metaphysical poetry and its vogue in the modern times, many practising artists have fallen for the pattern so much that, ultimately they have one trait or the other of this school in their works. The term, in literary circle, was originally used derogatively by Dr. Johnson to abuse Cowley and his clan. The credit duly goes to Prof. Grierson in his introduction to Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century in rendering and popularising the unique poetic virtues of this school. Eliot's appraisal of the Metaphysicals in the light of - fusion of thought and emotion, telescoping of images and multiplied association, (303) heterogeneity of material compelled into unity, (304), analytic method and ingenuity of the conceit and argumentative skill, considering the metaphysical overtones in Eberhart's death poems.
Hence Eberhart's metaphysical death experiences are diffusive. They comprise of mystical and cathartic views on death; the quality of regeneration; and avowal of certainty of life beyond death, founded upon either secular or religious faith.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'mystic' as one who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the understanding. But the current relaxed use of the word discards religious connotations and identifies mysticism with esoteric occultism, the use of allegory and symbol, mysteriousness, pretty fancifulness, ineffectual idealism, second sight, anything vast and vague and sentimental (Donald Attwater).

It is not easy to visualise Eberhart's mysticism which does not hold deep religious implications; therefore it is nearer to the rationalistic mysticism when the mind is absorbed in an ecstasy and naturalistic mysticism which is a secularization of the conventional mysticism. But both religious and secular mysticism continue to provide an immediate experience of oneness with ultimate reality (Encyclopaedia Britanica 1132). To speak generally, Eberhart's conception of mysticism and
romanticism is concerned with the reality of death. Being unafraid of the Universal questions, he touches upon mysticism and man’s mortality. His mysticism is self-awareness and awareness of the ultimate reality. Among all the senior American Poets, he has been the most mystical .... and at his best his explorations and celebrations have an unquestionable authority (Rosenthal). Therefore his mystical poems are mostly intuitive and highly imaginative. They probe into the Ultimate reality and they stand independently. An analysis of a few representative poems will bring to light, his voice of mysticism.

"My Bones flew Apart" is a postmortal visionary experience that is, the imaginative perception of after-death experiences of the speaker’s bones objectively observed. It celebrates simplicity and unity and it contrasts again what man imagines as reality (Engel 41). Accepting the war invitation extended by the Bone God, the flying and knocking bones of the speaker are reluctant to enter into the valley of lamentation, where peace never comes. He comprehends the conflicting mutability of man’s passions and desires against timelessness. The supposedly dead bones are rejuvenated with life and renewed with strength; and like a bride they flutter against the strife of life. They are brought to
new existence and new experience which do not reflect a happy outlook, instead, a cold nest enters to discoulour and sadden the atmosphere.

The Bone God makes two observations of man; first man is the fruition or the result of what his intellect would bring him to; and secondly he is the impotent source of the trial of infinite tears. After the visionary experience, the sun, Eberhart's favourite embodiment of spiritual inspiration and realisation restores the speakers scattered bones to knitted unison:

Then truth is but simplicity
I cried, revivified, sanctified
And turning to my neighbour alive
Said, I will give my life to you.

(CP: 1986 30)

The poet understands that spiritual magnitude and happiness is possible and more rewarding than reliance on intellect. Now thoroughly awakened to truth, he demonstrates to the neighbour, - to the world - that is love and concern alone would perfect and complete the spiritual dimension. The process of realisation of great truth is being conducted through a highly imaginative after-death experience.
Eberhart explores all possible ways and means in search of truth and answers to all his misgivings. The favourite level is the mystical experience in "I walked Out the Graveyard to See the Dead." The poet walks out to the graveyard to meet the dead but the Impenetrable iron gates are closed, in suggestion of strong objection. But he is fascinated by the golden pheasant, the symbol of philosophic idealism. The poet addresses the bird in terms of respect and regard:

Said I, Sir Bird, wink no more at me
I had had enough of my dark eye smarting:

(CP: 1986 53)

He expresses his inability to adore such an idealism but he can only assign the bird to the inaccessible philosophy Montaigne's Habit of Mind which is unrelated to humanity. He realises that such far-fetched philosophy helps none but what is advocated is: action must be learned from love of man. To talk with the Absolute or speak of unearthly ideas is like confronting the shadow. The pursuit of such knowledge is loss of one's own sell.

The concept that death is but a door and Life beyond death is real and is asserted in the poem, "The Recapitulation." He states the futility of intellect for mystical experiences and only intuitive knowledge would aid in the revelation. The momentary experience is described as:
A state of purity, sweet grace
It is, nor can least long,
But in that essence, I feel
Life beyond death is real.

(CP: 1986 59)

In the last three stanzas he introduces God and spirit of holy love. One is curious to know whether it is Christian confession of faith, but the poet avoids any specific reference to Christian Deity here. He clearly distinguishes between two spheres - rational and spiritual; and appeals to God to grant the rational mind, things rational and the spirit should be accorded with what is spiritual.

Imagine how it would be to be dead, is the graphic description of the mystical elation the speaker’s experiences. He grows dizzy and cannot keep his hands together or overpower his heart but:

I seemed to break time apart
And thus became all things air can touch
Or could touch could it touch all things,
And tins was an embrace most dear,
Final, complete, a flying without wings.

To Eberhart, the romantic, all things are possible through imagination.
"Sometimes the Longing for Death" states the earnest longing for imaginative death which is not so simple. He expounds the difficulty of such a condition. Not that imaginative death is unimaginable but he means by the term, the upliftment or elevation of experience, This kind of excited and elevated feeling transports the experienced to new life which is free from hope because, being totally free from pain, there is no requirement for hope at all. The narrator asks whether for the experience of supernatural love and possession of new life, man has to walk in the valley of miseries, and lead a life in wrenching cycles:

Is it for this, most personal, most secure
Life turn, in goodness, and in evil
To tear out wits out of our wills
To its build, tremendous godhead?

(CP: 1986 107)

"Nexus" treats a vague belief that communication with the dead is possible. It is not by automatic speech or writing or by the agency of a medium but it is rather a condition of trance. The dead would appear:

So real they have their flesh and bones
They appear as they had been,
And speak with firm day time tones.

(CP: 1986 240)
The final stanza discloses the poets avowed confirmation about their unearthly influence and guidance over the living:

The dead are playing about my head
As real as present, effable air,
They have their power to make and shape
Each breath. I take, each thought to-day.

(CP: 1986 241)

Each poem of Eberhart, one mystical experience stands isolated, embodying one aspect of his concept on death.

The Greek word, catharsis which means cleansing and purification, literally stands in literature to denote an outlet to emotion afforded by art, especially by the drama (Current Literary Terms 46). This was used by Aristotle in Poetics 6, to define one of the functions of tragedy-arousing pity and terror-in order to purge the emotions. Death and contemplation of death is believed to serve a cathartic function. Analogous to Aristotelian Catharsis is traumatic neurosis which is physical or emotional shock, is suggested by Freud in his theory of neurosis. This may be otherwise called the Mithridatic (immunity to pain) function of tragedy. Here the slow experience of pain qualifies oneself to pain. Accordingly meditation on death serves a greater function as it is suggested in "A Meditation". It removes all fears and
horrors associated with death and prepares oneself to meet one's
death and to fulfil one's duties in life,

"A Meditation" elucidates the truth:
As war purges society, as death rarifies life,
So contemplation of death is valuable
Restorative of the soul to new, even reaches
Easing a little burden of our suffering
And blow like the wind away.

(CT: 1986 57)

In content and theme, it is similar to that of Hamlet's musing on
the skull with a difference that the skull itself is the speaker
here, but it is very cautious like the ghost in Hamlet, as not to
disclose the mystery beyond the grave.

It is in the form of a dramatic monologue where the
speaker tells the most arresting dramatic situations like that of
Donne's are crucially and dexterously manipulated.
The presence of the interlocutor is cleverly suggested: "You are
holding my skull in your hand."

There is a note of sigh when the skull feels: I cannot get
back, cannot reach or yearn back, Nor summon love
enough, nor the intellectual care -Being dead, you talk
as if I had spirit at all - To come back to you and tell
you who I am. You do me too much honour with your
grave words And quizzical head bent down, trace of a
lovable smile, Too much too much honour for one so
windless, And witless, wizened long past wandering and
pondering. Go back to your strict durites of the earth,
man, Make love to your girl long nights, and long
summer days.

(\textbf{CP: 1986} 54-55)

It opens man's eyes to the cessation of brief existence when the
ruthless shock ends all. Man foolishly imagines himself to be the
unlimited possibility, an arcan marionette and tries to see
beyond life. Being ignorantly complacent, he builds his
hierarchies upon unthinkable loss and destitution.

In the following stanzas the speaker gives a dismal picture
of mundane life. It is a life of sensuality, selfishness and
materialism. Man is tied to his passions, chocked by ambition,
dizzy over conquests and is reduced to nothingness in defeat.
More than once, the skull maintains the Preacher's Lone in the
Bible about the vanity of everything: For he cometh in with
vanity and departeth in darkness and his name shall be covered
with darkness (Ecclesiastes, 6:4).

Now, coming to the close of its preaching, the skull
expresses its wish to come to life so that it can admonish self-
centred man and convince him of the simple truth - that man
should be conscious of his imperfection and the futility in his striving. Finally it recommends obedience to scripture even in rotten times and exhorts him to practise know-thyself philosophy, and remain quietly resigned to death as one is to birth because life blows away like the wind. The speaker persuades man to get back to action after his solemn and cathartic meditation which no doubt has been like:

Easing a little the burden of our suffering Before we blow like the wind away And blow like the wind away.

*(CP: 1986 57)*

Hence, contemplation of death has its own rewards. The term, Neo-Platonism suggests A school and system of philosophy arising in Alexandria in the third century A.D., combining some of the doctrines of Greek philosophy, including those of Plato with the mystical religious ideas of the East (H.C Wyld, Universal English Dictionary). One aspect of Neo-Platonism is the belief in renewal after death. It is the merging of the spirit with the universal spirit. Hence behind all the vicissitudes of life, the school affirms that one's existence is preserved intact in a renewed form.

In some of Eberhart's poems dealing with mortality, he seems to have been conspicuously influenced by Neo-Platonism or Shellyean cycle. There exists one Universal Mind which
animates the universe; and every portion of the universe is quickened by this principle. Death annihilates the body, dissolves its properties and brings about the perfect union of the individual with the Universal. Thus the dying spirit is absorbed into the Infinite Spirit and manifests itself in another form.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" assures a seasonal cycle ending in fulfilment and death. Assurance is given in the first stanza itself:

The winged seeds where they lie cold and low
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
These asure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth.

Although the last stanza pictures a gloomy season, the close of the year, there is an assurance of Spring, or the continuous life of nature which eternally renews itself. The poet concludes with an optimistic note towards the end: "If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" In "Adonais" Keat's death is nothing but the absorption into the Infinite Spirit, therefore he would be made again a part of the world through which his spirit is diffused:

He is made one with Nature; there is heard
His voice in all her music.

(370-371)
Some of Eberhart's poems relied similar concept of regenerating death. The deceptively simple looking poem "For a Lamb" emphatically denies the notion that death is an end of life. The composition of this piece was occasioned after seeing a dead lamb among the daisies in a field near Cambridge, England in 1928. It is a metaphysical poem based on the proposition that things are not what they seem. (PP 27-28). It offers two possible readings, one on the surface level and the other one on the philosophical level. The poet carefully sets the paradoxical mood, marking the contrast between repulsive lifeless physical body and the total apathy and unconcerned serenity on the part of the objects in nature.

The poet saw the decomposed body of a deceased lamb on a slant hill, an appropriate and dramatic setting for the musing of the speaker. It is a place, far from the madding crowd, free from the din and the bustle of city life. He did not see the decayed body on top of the hill, or in the plains or at least in the valley but on a slant hill - a proper juncture to take decision. Either his thoughts can go heavenward or remain earth-bound. Hence the perception of death and decay with naked eyes can give an onlooker spiritual upliftment or utter disillusion, a kind of feeling one would experience after a funeral.
The antithetical setting of the beautiful daisies enshrouding the repulsive body is intentional. The sleep is not a mere dozing off but deep unperturbed slumber; the face is comfortably nudged in the fertile green-pillow. Lifelessness against life is juxtaposed.

There is a sudden shift in the mood from complacency and comfort, to the state of disgust and disillusionment to see the guts out for crows to ear. The second stanza poses a few questions

Where's the lamb? Whose tender plant
Said all for the mute breezes.

(CP: 1986 4)

The answers inferred, suggest the identification of all life principle merging with the elements:

Say he's in the wind somewhere,
Say, there's a lamb in the daisies.

(CP: 1986 4)

May be the poet is wavering between belief and doubt for a moment. The poet recedes from the subtle ambiguity to the only answer that the lamb is somewhere and he does not want to probe further into the mystery of nature.
It must have been part of Eberharts belief in the cyclic change in nature. When the crows feast upon the guts of the lamb, it is not the finale in the life of the lamb; it has become part of the body of the crow in its physiological changes and there is no end to it. It is in the wind, it is in the daisies or he is quite certain that it is somewhere in the atmosphere. The first stanza describes the biological change and the second one that of the spirit. The crows represent the animal world, the daisies the vegetation and the wind the elemental forces. All the three symbols compose nature and constitute the universe. The poet emphasises the perpetuation of this cycle, this form of survival after death. As long as matter exists the cycle will continue.

Eberhart expresses his awareness of Shellyean cycle in another poem entitled "Rumination", a short poem consisting of eight lines. He affirms that when a stone undergoes physical changes, it becomes sand and soil, still retaining and regaining its original properties and characteristic nature; and when he sees

The roots of living things grow in this land.
Rushing between my fingers flowers and tree,

(\textbf{CP: 1986 58})

his faith in regeneration is affirmed. Then the poet would be as knowing and as well informed as death itself - the omniscient;
and he would know the mysteries of existence beyond death. Death would certainly inculcate this knowledge and fire my clay, when I am still.

Poetry reading has become very popular in modern times and Eberhart's "Cover me Over" is not infrequently read and intently listened to by audience. The poet remarked, it [the poem] is on the gravestones of three members of his family that it may eventually be on others (Engel 30). The melodic effect and the dramatic situation, two essential requisites for any poetry reading are to be found here:

   Green arms about my head,
   Green fingers on my hands
   Earth has no quieter bed
   In all her quiet lands.

   (CP: 1986 58)

The verbal music is enhanced by short lines and succinct expression.

Another poem of his entitled "The Scarf of June" carries the moving and ordering principle of the universe as its theme. The speaker is the man beyond the grave:

   I slumber through time's weariness,
   Apart from phantoms, far apart
From suns young running down warm lands
With flame for flower and three.

(\textbf{CP: 1986 36})

He realises the presence of regenerating spirit that enlivens all objects:

Spirit that animates man and hill
Will work in the hot seasonal birth,
and continues the idea in the concluding stanza:

Thus time can do no harm, so let
Him come, through roots and branches creeping,
Bringing spring and winter in
And hurrying life away.

\ldots
Locked in this line discipline
Against the world's decay.

(\textbf{CP: 1986 36})

The speaker is impassable to time and has merged with earth's inner being. The certitude of life after death for human beings constitutes part of Richard Eberhart's faith in life-in-death.