Chapter – III

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NEO-ROMANTIC ELEMENT

Richard Eberhart explores the possibilities of a personal lyricism enclosing a broad spectrum of human experience and boldly testing the forms and language for articulating what imagination gives and intuition seizes. One cannot classify Eberhart very easily. He stands out as a highly individualistic writer. He dedicated himself to a life of imagination and the craft of poetry.

Eberhart is also purely lyrical at the opposite end of his emotional range. The following lines reflect this:

Cover me over, clover,
Cover me over, grass
The mellow day is over
And there is night to pass.

(CP: 1986 58)

This passage gives a mere sampling of the variety of moods to be found in Eberhart's writing and the language he uses to evoke them. It is found that emotional pressure or the love of wit
exceeds the poets control and discrimination. As a result, it is observed that there are faults in diction, tone and rhythm. But it is a small price to pay for many successes. The voice is recognizably original. Eberhart's notion of poetic creation, of the act of composition, and of the operations of the poet's mind - all of them are so intimately connected with what he conceives to be his essential artistic task. It makes him vulnerable to these dangers as well as leading him on to an abundance of fine poems. In this chapter the following pages examine briefly the evaluation of Richard Eberhart from a Romantic poet to a Neo-Romantic poet.

Eberhart thinks of the poem at its highest level inspirational in origin. He designates several of his pieces "as coming under this (Platonic) theory of creation". In view of the above, a reader found that the qualities of Eberhart are spontaneity and the immediate presence of involvement with a particular experience. The long autobiographical poem, "A Bravery of Earth", achieves such effects. The poet loses himself too often and controls over his material in the current of his strong but conflicting emotions.
The qualities of inspiration, the emotional intensity, the earnestness, the moral and personal sincerity are there to conclude that Eberhart is in a way a twentieth-century Romantic. "Romantic is a nebulous and dubious epithet. The Romantic Movement was a historical phenomenon with some measure of coherence. It is a matter of record that every literary movement since 1830 has either allied itself with one or the other of the great Romantics, or, more commonly in this century, defined itself in its opposition to all Romanticism.

In his early poems Eberhart emerges as a Romantic in more definite sense than Stevens implies in the assertion. Eberhart is a nature poet. He would not object to being called one. Furthermore, he has allied himself with no twentieth-century school of poetry. But Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Whitman obviously influenced him in his earlier years. The themes of Eberhart's poems are just like the themes of Romantic poets. But Eberhart's solutions to the problems are different. He offers modified and modernized solutions to the problems that concerned him.

Like all poets, Eberhart frequently takes some object of everyday nature - a beast, a bird, an insect or a flower. Nature poetry of this sort is as old as medieval bestiaries. It is
allegorical in nature. It contains moral illustrations. And nature poetry of this sort is still popular in American letters. Marianne Moore draws lessons from seagulls or fishes. Richard Wilbur has compiled a modern bestiary. Robert Frost images forth truths of man and nature from birches or butterflies or cows in apple-time.

Some of Eberhart’s poems of (his sort resemble Frost’s. In the poem "New Hampshire, February" two wasps are found wintering on New Hampshire tree. They are brought into the kitchen and breathed upon by the poet. One wasp dares to attempt to fly. But it falls and is crushed accidentally by the poet’s boot. The other safer and sager wasp remains to become a pet of Eberhart. He concludes:

The moral of this is plain.

But I will shirk it

You will not like it. And

God does not live to explain.

(CP: 1960 67)

A Bravery of Earth was Eberhart’s first book. It was published in the year 1930. The whole volume is really one long poem in four parts. It forms something unique in twentieth-century American verse. It is a spiritual autobiography of a poet. Its obvious model is Wordsworth’s The Prelude. The Various
states of mind' that the poem attempts to create are defined as a series of 'awareness' chronicling the poet's growth from childhood to adulthood.

The poems in *A Bravery of Earth* are partly autobiographical and their relatively free and relaxed composition allows him to experiment with the variety of modes. It serves the major purpose of exploring the Neo-Romantic assumptions that he had held in the beginning of his career. In its aim, *A Bravery of Earth* parallels Wordsworth's intentions in *The Prelude*. Eberhart's *A Bravery of Earth* includes many passages dealing with events and incidents in the author's own life. Eberhart printed his work while still a young man, and it shows the heat and uncertainties of the talented beginner, whereas Wordsworth printed *The Prelude* when he was a matured poet and capable of judicious view points.

Eberhart's concern, moreover, is not with how a man may find solace through nature but with how he may endure and win a measure of "bravery". Assuming that death is an event of significance, not simply an end to existence, he asks what this significance may be; and he alternately exults, cries out, and meditates as he ponders over the question of how man should confront destiny. Eberhart's speaker opens by celebrating a
youthful fervor of mystery. Though the young poet recognizes that sobering age will come, he holds the thought of it in abeyance. Central to the passage are lines 5 and 6, in which he speaks of the "secret hallowing" that "fevers" him as "Mystery", made visible, in growth, yet subtly veiled in all. The sensory delight of spring express a force in experience which he can recognize but cannot comprehend, which nature symbolizes but does not explain. His use of "regenerate" and "incarnation", as well as "hallowing", suggests a religious, if not specifically Christian basis for his fervor. Rapturous moments are brief, for life is a "quick kaleidoscope" that shuffles one between summary wonder and wintry doubt. Recognizing about life and mortality, the poet knows that he is naked in the universe.

Like Wordsworth, Eberhart's poetic career witnesses three stages of philosophical or aesthetic existence paralleling man's growth from childhood through youth to early adulthood. In man's first stage, the child, arriving as a "spark of .... new, ancient life", as a newborn human being and as a representative of an "insistent" life force of "will", lives in a "simple awareness" of the world about him. Man moves through the second stage into the third, the young adulthood in which he achieves "the
first perilous understanding" of his destiny. Much of the poem's first fifty-two pages is a celebration of the second stage—the youth during which man experiences "the spacious interval of eager animal harmony".

The second section of the poem (56-65) reports the speaker's decision to become an artist, a decision which is shown, not as the consequence of the compulsion nor as of a moment of conversion, but, as a deliberate act of the will. He made the choice in order to escape chaos, to find freedom through creation of art. He climbs the hill of art, the home of an absolute beauty appearing in the objects of nature, the forms the artist would imitate. At times, he is tempted to rise only to a height at which he feels a kinship with the great dead (both those of the past, and those yet to live and with nature itself. But he climbs on, determined to explore the dualisms, indeed the complexities, that he once thought chaotic but now knows to be part of existence. He reflects that, though the sun brings an overflow of feeling, the will as the "urge to art"; and he ascends to peaks where he becomes a "tringling and visionary being". At this height, he sees five Greeks apparently, Homer, Prometheus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Other figures also
appear, among them Michelangelo and Nietzsche, the latter celebrated, as one who shouted "what mankind might strive to become". But, finding this height too rarified, the poet returns to his fellow men.

The third section (63-71) opens with an apostrophe, urging the mind to find a way to harmonize the delights man’s senses give him with the darkness and the doubt that come from his knowledge of mortality. The poet finds that moments of absolute vacancy come, hence the mind perceives neither the sun of delight nor the shadow of doubt, and the very objects that at other times give rise to sensations seem to exist only in the brain. In this stage, when one concludes that "The objects one senses are in the mind", the mind becomes "the conqueror of life". A unity is imposed, but it is meaningless, a merely static and terrifying blankness. Such "Willed annihilation" breeds a terror in which there is neither certainty nor doubt, only promise of death. The poet throws himself upon the stars and sun, struggling to go beyond the human to "the full impersonal" where he senses the unity of man and is one with the sun.

The ascent of the hill foreshadowed the long voyage over the Pacific and through the Indian Ocean which provides the narrative thread for the quest that is related in the fourth
section, highly artificial syntax perhaps intended to be reminiscent of Hopkins.

Resolution comes finally, not as the solution to a logical problem, but as a realization of the poet's participation in the godlike energy which he postulates as the active principle in the universe. Man, if he imitates the gods by heroic action may, one gather, become like them. Understanding this possibility enables one to surpass youth, to achieve a maturity in which "man stands up/In a bravery of earth". This achievement is as glorious as the sunrise that sets grass glowing in the spring, that "fevers" the poet with sensory delight and with desire for understanding. This attainment is not a triumph over time, because man still must die, but it is a heroic confrontation. The poet, who sees dualism of man and spirit, will not proclaim a unity he cannot discover, but he maintains that man in his sphere can exemplify some of the nobility of the spiritual.

And A Bravery of Earth shows no influence from Eliot, Pound, Frost, or Williams; for Eberhart's associations, as has been noted, are with the English Romantic poets. His poem is Wordsworthian in some of its meditative and narrative passages and in its use of tags from Plato's idea of definite stages in man's spiritual development; but it is Blakean in the fire of some of its
lyrics. It is Shelleyan in its resolution, like that of "Ode to the West Wind"; is an apotheosis: not a god, the poet will be godlike in his defiance. Yet his "bravery", after all, is of the earth - it is the sun that favours him - and his hope in the end is to understand the destinies of men, through their actions. The ending thus shows the direction, though not the realization of the development Eberhart's aesthetics would undergo. One need not lessen his admiration for American accomplishment in order to recognize that, for a poet of Eberhart's bent, the choice of the English Romantic model was fortunate. The shifting speculations, the sometimes evanescent moods and tracings of ideas in the book-length poem, are accompanied by marked shifts and uncertainties in style. The poem has an occasional disastrously bad lines (line 12: "Rabbits dash beneath the brush"). It has, too, such over exclamatory, Wordsworthian lines as "But most, my favourite flower, joyous / I brought, the wild tigerlily". Overwrought and exaggerated passages and pages of prosaic writing indicate that the poet is not yet sure-handed. A Bravery of Earth is not a great poem. But it has a fervor that carries the reader along and that is supported by enough poetic evidence to keep the whole from collapsing.
Eberhart's short lyric lines with their irregular rhymes and rhythms are very much his own. But the stages in the poet's spiritual growth are remarkably like those Wordsworth describes in *The Prelude*. The first 'awareness' of life as well as sensual force, the "fever" of the sun and of the world of energy and sub-intellectual life need mentioning. This is very much the same as the feeling for nature which Wordsworth described in his youthful days climbing over the Cumberland hills or along the banks of Wye. Gradually the poet grows into the light of a new manhood, 'A Bravery of Earth'. The third "awareness" brings a new understanding between man and nature. The vision is similar to Whitman's.

The elemental joy in physical nature is characteristic of Eberhart's early poetry. He achieves a pure nature lyric in his mature poetry. An even later poem "Summer Landscape" with its delicate observation and its richly sensuous imagery and sleepy rhythms reminds us one of Keats's "Ode To Autumn". But the joy in uncomplicated nature is rare in Eberhart's latest poetry. He moves on to consider themes and problems as more complex and tragic. The second 'awareness' comes for him as it came for the first Romantics. The Romantics did not come by their mature 'single visions', easily. A new mystic vision came into being when the Romantics had arrived at a new unity.
Wordsworth found his new unified vision in nature in which all things were transformed into spirit. But Blake's synthesis is modern. He refused to relinquish the world of the flesh in the realm of the spirit. His god created both the tiger and the lamb. In this respect Eberhart is closer to Blake than to Wordsworth. In a much later 'animal' poem, "Seals, Terns, Time", the poet illustrates man's dual nature by picturing himself balanced in a boat on the surface of the sea, drawn between the seals, those 'blurred kind forms that rise and peer from elemental waters', and the terns, wheeling gracefully in the free blue of the sky.

In his early poetry, Eberhart does sometimes discover a unity in organic nature, at the heart of things, but when he does, it is not the moral and personal nature of Wordsworth. One of his longer poems, describing a walking trip through Wordsworth's lake country, appeals in turn to all of the senses, and the hurried, short, and irregular lines seem even to catch something of the breathlessness of mountain climbing. The poem culminates in a mountain-top experience on Helvellyn, perhaps parallel to Wordsworth's on Snowdown, but Eberhart does not see Wordsworth's "emblem of a mind... that broods over the dark abyss"; he feels instead that:
A surge of demonic energy unites
Blood and the bitter world-vitality
As the flaying and flayed being ignites
In elemental passion intensity
Satanic, angelic, one harmony
Of immense glory like fire clinging
A blaze of terrible immediacy
The wild blood of freedom singing ...

(CP: 1986 7)

In later poems, this transcendent unity is often more quiet, if not less terrible - a white hardness, like what he sees in the eye of a "Sea-Hawk", a "piercing, inhuman perfection/... A blaze of grandeur, permanence of the impersonal". But in a very few of his latest poems Eberhart comes close to that vision of a unity in organic nature which is so peculiarly Blakean - in that vein which Middleton Murray, speaking of Keats and Blake called an inverted 'this-worldly' mysticism, because paradoxically, it sees a 'transcendent' unity not by denying the flesh, the senses, and things of the earth, but by reaching through the senses to the blood. Such a poem is "Thrush Song at Dawn", the concluding poem in Great Praises (1957), a poem which seems to be entirely successful. The fourth stanza echoes the "Immortality Ode", and the idea of a 'lost purity' is perhaps also
Wordsworthian, but the substance of the poem has more of D.H.Lawrence, and the image with which the poem closes carries the same tenor as that of the Romantics:

Bird song is flute song and a glory
Of the morning when the sun unascending
Holds his other glory of mentality

And the dawn has not the mental mockery
But the birds from sweet subconscious wells
Pierce through all barriers to sense,

They send and giving sing divinity,
So sweetly charged with subterranean meaning
They are like angels in the morning

Come from ancient time, a fast enchantment,
To bless our mortal songless weakness
And trail a vocal glory all the day.

I would not be a bird, but I would hear
Deep in some lost purity, beneath the mind,
There in the sweet, dark coil of time,
Another way to face the central issue of duality in man and nature is to approach it obliquely. Here one has to probe the ultimate mystery of death. This theme was also a favourite theme of the Romantics. A realization of the evanescence of sensual beauty in the face of death is the central agony of Keats' greatest odes. His solution was aesthetic. The life-long development of Shelly's thought is traced in his changing attitudes towards death. In the concept of an impersonal immortality, he found his peace. Eberhart is the first poet for whom death has become a persistent theme. His concern is not with death as a concept but with death and decay as a brutal physical fact. In Eberhart's poetry dead lovers do indeed embrace, as in the first part of "Suite in Prison".

.... They sink deeper in abysmal love
And in the slowest satisfying last
Are tightened, till they get great regiments
Of babes with petal spears to pierce the air.

(CP: 1960 18)

This preoccupation of Eberhart with death is a different attempt to see the inner. Sometimes, Eberhart takes a Shelleyan consolation in the fact that death and decay are a return to nature. Nothing alive is ever wholly lost. But the poet does not always find such solace in the thought of death as a return to
living earth. From a strictly human point of view, the tragedy remains, and this is the theme of Eberhart's most famous and most often anthologized poem, "The Groundhog", another animal-emblem poem.

Politics is the science of the possible, whereas poetry is the art of the ideal. Hundreds of anti-war poems have been written in recent times. Poets could write anti-war poetry if they wished. They have been pro-war poems through the ages. Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" is a human poem. People have nationalist poems like "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic". But nobody considers them among the best American poems. One argues in favour of political poetry, and pro-war poetry. But Eberhart's temperament leans on the opposite direction. Some of Byron's Cantos were political. Shelley was ousted from Oxford for politics. Whereas, Blake, Wordsworth and many other poets said something about politics, Eberhart has not dealt with politics but with other conditions of man. Wordsworth's lyrics are unpolaritical as are the lyrics of Blake. Stephen Spender's "I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great" is a truly great poem.

Eberhart is neither an anti-religious poet nor a grossly materialistic one. Some have considered him a religious poet. But his poetry is spiritual in the sense that it is hazy or it is
ethereal. His poetry is imaginative and religious without belonging to any set church. He has no dogmatic poems. So he is not dogmatic. He has one poem in the new book *Fields of Grace* (1972) called "The Meditation of God". The poem deals with the concept of God versus man, good versus evil and absolute versus relativity. The theory of dualism is well reflected in the following lines:

If I were God I would be ashamed of being absolute.
I would absolutely want to be relative.
Warning man makes me see the truth of the relative.
I would be absolute, but absolute relatively.

Then I could leap into every heart
And there play an essential part, I
could penetrate into every man An
love him with my sole heart

**(CP: 1986 29)**

The three poets who influenced Eberhart were Wordsworth, Blake and Hopkins. Eberhart held Buddha as a hero for a long time. Buddha’s ideas had a great impact on Eberhart. He loved the story of Buddha. Buddha preached and achieved Nirvana and Swami Vivekanananda preached the Highest Goal. He achieved that Nirvana which means free from fear. It is a
state of ultimate grace and negation and of peace of harmony and oneness and nothingness. These ideas powerfully influenced Eberhart for a long time. But he does not want to be a Buddhist. From the foregoing discussion one can conclude that Eberhart is a Neo-Romantic poet.