

Richard Eberhart's Poetic Theory: Art and Craft

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Abstract

This paper is a maiden attempt to bring a promising, independent and prolific poet, Richard Eberhart to the fore, and to focus attention on the most dominating and pervasive theme in his poetry. His central theme of mortality is like a lofty mountain that dominates the entire landscape of his works. No matter what the road the reader takes, what pass he treads, he would find the mountain bursting on his vision at every turn of the way and at every parting of the hills. The secret of his upheld popularity rests on his uniquely strong individuality, romantic mould, spasmodic vigor, simplicity of expression and a deep concern for mankind. Kenneth Rexroth has rightly remarked that Eberhart is the poet of the academies. His long teaching experience, in school, navy and colleges; 'independent intelligence' and imaginative fervor, confirm the indisputable statement. He is a poet who is greatly indebted to tradition as far as the influences are concerned but he owes equally to 'traditionless' experiments. He attempts neither influences nor 'traditionless' experiments for its own sake, unless it contributes to the aesthetic integrity. He is totally devoted and sincerely dedicated to the writing of poetry but never considers it as an accident. He has a high notion of poetry like the Emersonian transcendental value of poetry. He feels that a successful poem is a proportionate blending of feeling and ideas:

Poetry is the heart and head. If it is all heart, it may become soft. If it is all head, it becomes arid. (Opp,5)

Here is a poet who vows to live for poetry:

Some of our best poets have died for poetry by suicide. Poets should not die but should live for it. I deplore the suicides of these people.

(Ralph J.Mills. Richard Eberhart, 13)

Keywords: Mortality, metaphysical, vindication

Richard Eberhart believes that poetry comes out of suffering and through "divine frenzy". He does not claim that all his poems are composed under such impulses. He is of the opinion that "poetry is also a craft" and poems have to be built up by meticulous and rational method. In the Annual Poetry Lecture delivered at Mill's College. Eberhart observed. "If I have a theory of poetry, it is that poetry is a gift, a gift of the Gods if you will, or a gift of nature, but at any rate it is not something that can be achieved by the at most study" (PP 18-26).

As a poet Eberhart is a relativist. He also believes in the concept of dualism. According to him, pain gives way to pleasure, it is not pleasure without the knowledge of pain. Like Blake, he realized that experience cannot be achieved without innocence. One should have knowledge of physical versus spiritual suffering. The message of Lord Buddha that one should learn to suffer and renounce all desires which lead to evil, a lasting impression on his mind. He felt that "Poets suffer in the imagination" and "it is impossible to conceive of great poetry being written without a knowledge of suffering."

While death is ultimate mystery to Richard Eberhart, "poetry is a mysterious business of him" (Donoghue 8). In his Notes on Poetry" Richard Eberhart clearly defines the nature of poetry and the function of a poet. Poetry is the magical fusion of thought and feeling. In this connection he, in his "Notes on Poetry", reminds us of the nature of metaphysical poetry.

"Poetry is of the heart and head
If it is all heart, it may become soft.
If it is all head, it becomes arid."

(PP 5)

According to him, a perfect poem is in a sense timeless, limited to the communication of its meaning through centuries. One reads Sophocles as it is. Poetry evaluates sciences. Science does not evaluate poetry. He makes an emphatic comment, "I would not die for poetry. I would live for it" (PP 3). He deeply regrets for those best poets who have died for poetry by suicide.

To the question "what is poetry?" Richard Eberhart opines that "First it is an adventure of the soul among mystification" (PP 12). Poetry is the pursuit to the discovery of truth. The mind revels in the delight of poetry in its rhythm, music and in the play and wisdom of words, second, poetry is a spell against death. The war poets Wilfred Owen. Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg wrote spells against their own deaths. Third, Poetry is a spiritual gyroscope. It keeps the mind on a true course, the true course of our common humanity. Fourth, poetry is an aesthetic

delight, without utilitarian value poetry is highly social as it is an act of communication; its purpose is to give delight to please, and to charm, to elevate.

Richard Eberhart goes on to explain what is pure poetry as opposed to “dross poetry”. According to him, “Pure poetry has clarity, simplicity and universality” (25). On dross poetry he states, it would be possible today to expose a dross poetry on the ground that everything is unclear, clear poetry could be a sign of hindrance, darkness perceptions, muddies the waters, pollutes the imagination (PP 25).

In “Why I write poetry”, his ready answer is “Because that is easier for me” (PP 30). It gives him delirium of joy, Poetry has infinite resource and time defying propensities. Poetry is more challenging to him than prose. He feels that everything about poetry is relative than absolute. Coleridge’s relativist statement, “Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood”, appeals to him most. He has been impressed by two theories about the complex and ancient art of poetry.

“One is that poetry comes from an excess of elan vital. It is an overflowing of powerful feelings from a healthy psyche” (PP 35).

Richard Eberhart was very much obsessed with the relation of “Will and Psyche in Poetry”, published between 1952 and 1961. He began to give lectures under the title. “Will and Psyche in Poetry.” He had set up a characteristic Eberhartian dualism between poetry of the Real and that of a quasi-Platonic ideal. These lectures were delivered in February and March 1956 and three of them have since been published. Eberhart’s well known the distinction between Will poetry and Psyche poetry is to the point. Psyche poetry pertains to the soul, to peace, quiet tranquility, serenity, harmony, stillness and silence. It provides psychic states of passive pleasure (PP 20).

Eberhart then says that Will poetry exists because of the power in the cell beyond its energy to maintain itself, ‘will’ results in action through zeal, volition, passion, determination, choice and command. ‘Will’ makes something happen in poetry. He has produced outstanding poems of each type, and he considers “The Fury of Ariel Bombardment” as his most widely known Will poem and “Life poem and “Life as Visionary Spirit” as his best Psyche poem.

To Eberhart poetry is commonly supposed to be an act of faith and a vindication of the human imaginative and creative capacity. These qualities are found in abundance in Richard Eberhart’s work, in his poetry and in his plays. When one reads Eberhart’s poems, one is struck by two characteristics. They are imaginative sympathy and a personal concern. Eberhart loves poetry. But he is not gullible about it. He is a fellow of feeling.

All is not order in either the prose or poetry of Richard Eberhart; he is beyond that. He has the gift of life as well as the gift of the library. In his poems he is the adventurous lover of the library. In his poems he is the adventurous lover of words. He belongs to no school but his own. One reads his poems and his assessment of other poems with an exulting sense of one’s own potentialities as to imagination and response to existence.

Poetry is like fighting to Eberhart. There was in his heart a kind of fighting. Hamlet was not averse to killing. But it is like shadow boxing. The poet is a self-knower trying to get out of himself. Poetry is a natural energy of Eberhart’s country. It has no energy crisis. Its power is equal to that of any country in the world. Eberhart’s poems show his democratic attitude towards poetry. It is hard to square elitism in poetry with democracy. In this respect the greatest elitism in poetry with democracy. In this respect the greatest poet Whitman was a poet of the people. Like Whitman, Eberhart is also free so that nobody will dictate to him what he shall say or write.

“Poetry and society are hand in glove, but the poet can pull of the glove and salute that sun and the stars. Poetry orders nature and tells it how it is. Poetry does not change the world, it changes the poet.” These are some of the definitions of poetry given by Eberhart in his Notes on Poetry (PP 5-7).

As already pointed out, the two major important experiences for Eberhart were the death of his mother and his military service. The two said experiences are relevant for the purposes of the study in this chapter, First, the relation of Will and Psyche to poetry is examined. Eberhart conceived these terms as opposite poles of a modern dichotomy. He chose them because they have impinged upon his consciousness for years. It is natural to Eberhart to think in terms of dualism. By thinking about poetry one makes certain determinations. This is the play of the mind, a pleasurable exercise. Eberhart does not say that truth is to be found. What he affirms is the relativity of truth within absolute limits and the normalcy of a dichotomous look at poetry. There is a certain modesty in his approach. One does not wish absolutism but a relative sagacity. Eberhart studied poetry from the creative point of view rather than from the presumptions of a reader who is not a poet and has no desire to write poetry. Eberhart’s approach of a dualism is mythical. In this connection Eberhart’s remarks are exploratory rather than dogmatic.

Richard Eberhart states “Will and Psyche” are a battery of descriptive terms. Will is of the body; Psyche of Soul is of or beyond the mind. Will is flesh; Psyche spirit. Will is impure; Psyche is pure. Will represents struggle and effort, Psyche represents an pure grace. Will is the body of this world; Psyche is the elusive, passive, imaginative quality

towards another. Will is interested; Psyche is disinterested. Will goes back to some basic power in the cell, an animal exercise. The cell has an excess of energy over its power to maintain itself.

Psyche is mysterious and its structure is cellular. There are many ideas about psyche. Variations are found in Eastern philosophy. It is assumed that we have a soul, a psyche somewhere about us. Will and Psyche enforce a real dichotomy. It is seen that these terms proliferate when we are born a portion of the world and soul is attached to our body. When we die, it ascends or departs. Will poetry and Psyche poetry represent only a small part of the whole like the small part of the soul? Eberhart admits that this is a possibility.

Of the two components of the dichotomy, psyche appears to be more elusive to ramify into more interesting complexities. There are many ways of enjoying poetry as there are ways of living. Eberhart does not say that Psyche poetry is better than Will poetry. It takes us to suspended delicious realms of ambiguity. It works partially through a religious attitude. Eberhart has written a short poem. It appeared in "Reading the Spirit" in 1937. It was written while he was in Cambridge between 1927 and 1929. It was written to the world at large. It was not written to anybody in particular. It was entitled "The Critic with his pained eye". Eberhart turns this poem upon himself. It goes as follows:

The critic with his pained eye
Cannot my source espy
For truly and purely to eye it
He would have as critic to die.
I with joyful vision see.
I cannot his purpose acquire
For it the critic were truly free
He would love, and not be a liar.

(CP : 1986 41)

The quoted poem is neither purely of Will nor of Psyche. But it contains admixture of both. Eberhart was under the eye of I.A. Richards. He was aware of I.A. Richard's early belief that all modern poetry makes pseudo statements. In other words poems tell us lies. I.A. Richard's psychological point of departure was that in the modern world scientist alone demonstrates truth. This is the truth of physical experiment. There is rigidity and absolutism. Americans allowed only what worked and now they were becoming great. The assumption was that this was good.

Now the critical study is about what his short poem said. It posed in the first line a pained eye for the critic. This is an arbitrary choice of a word. It is meaningful and it sets the mood. The notion is that the pained eye of the critic cannot 'espy'. The eye does not find out the source from which the poet writes. It sets up a dichotomy between poetry and criticism. One sympathizes with the poet and believes what he says is true. The first stanza ends on the extended notion that the critic would have to die in order to see the source of the poet.

The critic is not directly attacked in the second stanza. But it tell us that creation is first and criticism second The poet has a superior hold on ultimate value. The last two lines cap off the central idea of the poem. What gives the poem its life is the terseness and economy of the expression. Words like 'purely' and 'truly' are placed to work efficiently. Close association is made between love with its joyful poetic vision and truth. If the critic were truly free, he would not be divorced from the nature of poetry.

The immediate tone of the poem impresses the obvious dichotomy upon the sensibility. Further, it is seen that it is a rather hopeful poem. This ultimately hopeful quality is the psyche part of the poem. Its thrust and somewhat belligerent immediacy is its will part. It is a true poem neither of will nor of psyche.

Eberhart shows us the horror of war. For example, "Protagonists" begins "To the man with his jaw shot away, blood badged":

As he falls our of the sky to earth or sea,
Existence is lethal, and then it is not.

(CP: 1986 181)

For three stanzas he tells of men who were either killed in the war or came home as heroes. His tone is neither eulogistic nor ironic. In the final five lines, however, the poet indicates his respect for the conscientious job seeker.

But, I see a man in blue denim, walking, walking,
Through the halls of conscientious objection
Because he took Christ seriously, immured,
A literalist of the imagination ! who
Believed do unto others – Thou Shalt not kill

(CP : 1986 182)

To Eberhart a poem is inspirational in origin, an idea busting upon the mind in a movement of trance-like vision. He reminds us of Plato's theory of creation of a poem and Wordsworth's spontaneity of creation. Eberhart's spontaneity combined makes him a unique Romantic poet of the twentieth century. The qualities of inspiration, the emotional intensity, the earnestness, the assertive moral and personal sincerity are enough to confirm that Eberhart is a twentieth century Romantic or Neo-Romantic poet.

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List of abbreviations used

Poetry

| | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Collected Poems: | 1930 – 1986..... | CP : 1986 |
| Collected Poems: | 1930 – 1960 | CP: 1960 |
| Poet's Progress..... | | PP |
| Of Poetry and Poets..... | | OPP |
| A Bravery of Earth..... | | ABE |
| Reading the Spirit..... | | RS |
| Song and Idea..... | | SI |
| Poems, New and Selected..... | | PNS |

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