DEATH: THE METAPHOR OF CRUELTY EXPRESSED IN THE POETRY OF RICHARD EBERHART

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ABSTRACT

Some of Eberhart’s poems deal with real death, natural death, and death as it is limited to this world or death as it is conceived in terms of ‘physique’ and some also treats death experiences after 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. Hence Eberhart’s metaphysical death experiences are diffusive. They comprise 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.

KEYWORDS: Cankering, destruction, malignancy, putrefaction, virulence

1. INTRODUCTION

Death is in no way less cruel to the body that has experienced it than it is to the bereaved. Death has its horror or unpleasant attributes because the bodily corruption is made visible to the naked eye. The poet is awakened to this cruelty of death, “the grim ferryman” (Shakespeare) who ferries across destined men into the land of decay and despoil. The poem “The Virgin” is a powerful expression of the feelings aroused by graphic details of cankering death on diseased bodies.

The poem offers some difficulty as to the identity of the virgin whether she is an imaginary figure symbolising youth and beauty, or the poet must have one particular sometime paramour of his life – the ‘Maia’ of his romantic dreams, whose death he poetises, is inconclusive.

The malignancy and virulence of death must have fogged his vision and he limits himself only to the corroding decay. The counterfeited denial of intention to dwell upon the vitiated body, at the opening line, “I will not think of her in her coffin,” (idea being repeated more than once in the poem “save me these pictures”), may sound “outmodish.” “But the poem is saved by freshness of imagery especially in the first twelve lines and by the vigour of lines 16 to 27 in which the speaker declaims in a neo-Elizabethan rank that is appropriate because sight of the girl is surely sufficient to touch it off” (Engel, 63).

The poignancy of the poem rests upon her inexplicable and extraordinary beauty being devastated by savage death. It runs through a series of imagery all bringing forth the fierce nature
of death. The worms are the agents of death in completing the destruction. All the three adjectives qualifying the cheek – ‘red’, ‘white’, ‘soft’ – are suggestive of her admirable beauty.

There is a shift in nature of personifications, the harsh death, the “needling” giant cruelly visualised stands in contrasts to naughty ‘boy winds’ playfully fingering her ‘resilent hair’. The first process of destruction of the flesh is complete by the graphic description:

The virginal nipples pinched by stones
The silver belly sullied by slime, ... (12)

The use of alliteration adds to the intensity of destruction. The order of decay moves from the fleshy body to the solid, less vulnerable bones which formed the structure and the support of the body once but now bereft of the strength:

.... bones, O!
Without strength to round the womb.
And April skin-shine browned and fouled. (16)

The concept that whether the declension of the mind corresponds to the deterioration of the body is debatable. But to the imaginative writer like Eberhart, it is possible:

Stinking under the sweating earth,
The mind’s whole marble disembowled. (20)

Whether the poet refers to the retention of consciousness which he describes in “When Golden Flies upon my Carcase Came” or the remnants of the brain inside the skull are not clear. The poet makes a pathetic plea to the “Captain worms of the gross earth,” that he should blot out the picture of “formal decay” from his mind.

The next four lines give a series of personifications of death – the ‘pornographic nature of death’ – with all loathsome and repugnant association of obscenity. It is a strange one Eberhart attributes ever feminine quality to death:

She is
Whore, or baser, a designing lecher ;
Equal to Helen, diced with jewels,
Putrid at the bawdy event, like her. (30)

The familiar Helen of Troy – the Queen of beauty is the agent of destruction and death in its destructive nature is likened to her. Even in its formal decay there is a fascination and there is some subtle imperceptible beauty.

The next few lines are about his poor Moll – the victim of death – who is “dead as a stump.” He is partly consoled that he did not know her in that pathetic plight:

But in feeling’s jammed proximity;
Doltish memory, cranky perception (CP : 1985,189)

he sees this “ruinous vision.” These feelings of nearness and affinity bind them together.

The destruction can be considered on three levels – the havoc on the body, on the bones and finally upon the mind, the realistic progressive deterioration under which the despoil has been masterly conducted by “Captain worms.” The moment of great intensity is cryptically drawn by the picturesque metaphors. The grief on the part of the speaker is made acute by the contrast between perfect beauty and an noxious condition to which it has been reduced. The grave is an end by itself and there is nothing beyond that.

“When Golden Flies upon my Carcaso Came” is another vivid illustration of physical decay, an unsentimental treatment of his imagined death. On the superficial level, there is no
sense of horror, mystery, morbidity or anything dreadful, instead he objectively views and enjoys at their play, the mission of completing the bodily decay. He seems to have felt that even physical decay is not an horrible as one imagines it to be.

The golden flies, “those pretty monsters,” “shining globules” like “tautened oily suns” assemble the luminous gems upon one point and bloom like “burning gold.” They work out a “disdem” decked with “their several gems.” In a sarcastic manner, he watches the devouring decay upon the “rotten flesh” brought about by the senseless little monsters, proclaiming the passing of time and the consequent arrival of death and decay. He exclaims that there is still beauty “even at the guts of things.” One might wonder whether it is possible to watch one’s own decay, and is there anything surviving, soon after one’s last breath.

To associate flies with putrefaction and decay is quite common. Though the poet assumes a bold front, there are suggestions of inward fear and horror at bodily corruption and decomposition. He would have seemingly defied fear and dread, but frequent suggestions to the burning gold do not give pleasant and approving suggestions. The horror is inwardly experienced but he tries to conceal it. The flies are monsters and the poet is entrapped. This recalls to one’s mind Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz when I died.” The point of attraction for Eberhart is the sight, visual; whereas to Dickinson it is the sound, auditory.

Toynbee remarked that death is a diadic event and the survivors’ burden is greater. The “cruelty of reality” reflects more terribly on the survivors than on the deceased ones. The effects of death are apparently manifested more upon the survivors than on those who experience it. Eberhart has written quite a number of poems describing his mournful experience at the loss of some of the people whom he personally knew and frequently not.

Even in dealing with real death, very rarely does Eberhart follow the epitaphic manner and elegiac pattern. His beautiful lyric “Lose” which belongs to his mid-poetic career, is from the “The Quarry collection”. During the course of Eberhart’s conversation with Engel, he had expressed much admiration for one Viola Lang, an actress and writer of verse dramas.

As a playwright, Eberhart must have known her personally and appreciated her extraordinary talents in acting. “Loss” has come out very well – a poem with an unsullied and touching expression of grief. This is dedicated to the same lady and a sincere homage is paid by a fellow artist.

The first three stanzas are a realistic portrayal of the poet’s honest impressions about her – the feelings which have the capacity to move the heart. There is a kind of magical spell which is cast upon the poem and there is a kind of elusive and mysterious fascination about her gentle personality. The enchantment is increased by the lucidity of expression and melodious phrasing. Verbal paraphrasing would be an utter failure and when attempted, full justice cannot be done:

- Her loss is as something beautiful in air,
- The mysterious part of personality
- Become the blue mystery of the air,
- The far and the near. (CP: 1960,200)

As an artist and playwright, she probably had an artistic personality and turn of mind which, “Become the blue mystery of the air.” The colour blue suggests not only sunnier aspect but also an amount of clarity and unearthliness. It commutates mobility and grace too. As in Steven’s “The man with the blue guitar,” it ay also stand for the colour of the transforming imagination and its products. As an actress, she infused gaiety, joy and laughter into her life.
“She made things gay and severe.” There is something austere about her personality. She must have successfully played many “roles” – may be directly referring to her part as an actress and indirectly hinting at the “roles” she must have played in the drama of life. The image “of dark and light” is skillfully adopted to single out the uniqueness of “her feminine grace of seeing” against the other “markings of dark and light.”

The tone of philosophising fuses into the liquid simplicity of expression and in the concluding stanza the first two lines read as follows:

I do not know how to say no
To time that goes in any case, (13)

These monosyllabic lines most powerfully and profoundly add to the sense of wonder the poem has successfully created. There is a note of disappointment, feeling of incompleteness and failure of words to aid him for the appropriate portrayal of his sincere feelings over her loss; and a sheer inability to explain his abandoned feeble condition at “The pure loss and the vision of her face.”

The diction is extremely simple and the lines, short or long depend on the melodious phrasing. The weaving back and forth of the same words and the repetition of the line, “Far and the near” to conclude the first two stanzas, are the artistic devices carefully adopted, to give the poem a sense of swiftness and a poignancy.

There is a non-stop easy flow of words. What David Daiches has remarked about the diction of Eberhart’s collection of Poems, New and Selected can appropriately be cited here too. “Eberhart has succeeded in aerating his language, in breaking down something of its over-solidity, so that such line and stanza responds more delicately to the idea which prompted it” (David Daiches Towards the Proper Spirit 94).

Corollary to the theme and treatment of “Loss,” is the simple poem “To Eyan.” It penetratingly manifests the helplessness of the bereaved towards the dying. Death is not beyond children’s ken. “To Evan” describes the death of a small child. The boy is the first son of Eberharts wife’s brother, his nephew. In what form and exactly at what age, the death-stroke had fallen upon him is not disclosed, hence of no importance to ponder upon mortality. But he must have suffered from sickness and death must have been a prolonged agony (“Dying slowly”).

It is an impassioned but restrained cry that the angelic form has taken his deep sleep and the poet is not able to prevent it:

I wanted to give him some gift,
The breath of my breath, the look of my eyes,
I wanted to give him some gift,
Lying there so piteously. (16-20)

The clever manipulation and the ringing repetition of the line “I wanted to give him some gift” – tellingly echoes the despair, helplessness and the poets’ deep down desire to save the boy at any cost. The comprehends his sacrificial gift of his life, but to restore life in him, would be “unwise.” His outrageous cry against the sky “at the unequal fate held over us from our birth” – is a universal and futile cry against death, a cry “man has from the beginning.” Even the “weight of his experience” has failed the poet to get reconciled to the “king of horrors” (The Bible).

The universal truth about man’s limitation and his incapacity as not only to “suspend” death but also to apprehend the “secret from secrecy” is presented in the most affecting manner. The little one has made his exit into the world inspite of the poet’s pitiable cry. The poet passes
“away silently and see(s) him no more.” The inequality of gorging death visiting upon “careless childhood” and a “slow consuming age” in “The Tobacconist of Eight Street” can be paralleled.

The intense ferocity and sorrow at dire “Hell’s grim tyrant” (Pope) is in no way mitigated when the death of a stranger, the tobacconist is, at consideration. The poet must have had secret admiration for the peevish old man at his business – mixing tobacco and pouring fragrance into it. With a keen observation, the poet has established the character and the singular personality of the businessman.

The stern voice of the man is exemplified by the phrase “Fields of Fire / Or of Arabia were in his voice.” One can see, “The weights of age, of fear were in his eyes / and on his neck time’s cutting edge.” One day when the poet happens to pass the Eighth street, the man has already “taken the downward path of life” (Horace). This particular incident becomes a wild lament on man’s evanescence and mortality and how life hangs by a thread:

And I howling into the crooked streets, Smashed with recognition; for him I flayed the air, for him cried out, and sent a useless prayer to the disjointed stones that were his only name: Such insight is one’s own death rattling past. (Opp, 25)

The sorrow overshadows him so much that he does not ponder upon beyond death and takes it for granted that death is absolute and it is an end by itself and leads nowhere. The considered poem describes the poet’s depressed feelings at obituary of near and far whereas “The Lament of a New England Mother,” is an imaginary portrayal of the bereavement experienced by the woman at the loss of her husband.

There are some poems of Eberhart which take the narrative form. The narrative form treats an imaginary event the “The Lament of a New England Mother.” The treatment of tender human emotion is presented in the most extraordinary way.

The specific occasion of which the poem treats is being disclosed. A woman has been deprived by death, of a loved one-her husband. Presumably, she has lost her way in sorrow, despair and bereavement. Concentrated capsule like phrases are suggestively used to illustrate her heart-rending sorrow. In the castle of torment – “I swing in the winds of chance.” She is shut up in the well fortified castle from which there is no possible outlet.

Her helplessness against fate is more intensified by the next analogy – how much she has been awayed “in the winds of chance,” implying that the course of the wind is unpredictable, hence fate unforeseen. The formidable fate is mighty and dominant like that of the potent wind.

She gets struck and blown terribly and her whole outlook is altered. The world was most stable once, but now she sees it “rocking.” Her once staunch will is trembling and measures the “panic” of her state. She realizes that the series of her miseries are as a result of having affronted providence with spleen.

But there is no sign of regret. Her fidelity to her husband is questionable when she cries, “When shall I trust in the love of pure husband?” She feels the impossibility of getting over her selfishness and hypocritical arguments. Her sincerity to her husband is at stake when she refers to so many of her lovers “gone into the garden.”

Her vision of the world is a hostile one. The world crushes and humiliates man. Discarding the luxury and false sense of values, she yearns to “live in the rich simplicity of the earth.” She thinks of herself as “the lost cornucopia / of June” – the abundant source of rich supply which she once enjoyed.
Abruptly the tone changes from indignant pain to the thought of her husband whose grave yard is on the hill. The sight terrifies her with the “rancour” of life. All her lovers have entered the “garden” and now she is companionless. Her fertile imagination is the “pest” to the world and annoys the world so much. She gives a vivid description of her state “I am a checker work of secret” – “Knocking together in a burden of black action.” Life has wrung her. Her “Despair is noncapitulatory” that is it cannot be appeased.

There is little in the poem to suggest why she seeks death except for the vulnerability to it and the fact of her solitude. The idea of death takes the same attraction – repulsion – dichotomy – towards life and world. The tension built upon the poem pivots upon her committing “myself into the hands of the State.”

Death is no doubt a reality but it is the cruelty of all realities as the poet has conceived it, cruel to the lifeless bodies and even more cruel to the survivors.

WORKS CITED