

UNRESOLVED INQUIRIES ABOUT DEATH:
EXPLICATED IN THE SELECT POETRY OF RICHARD
EBERHART

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ABSTRACT:

When Eberhart is obsessed with death and decay, he directs his attention on “the cruelty of reality”; when he is bewildered by his mystery of nothingness after experiencing loss, he lands on unresolved inquiries and when he realises that victory over the ‘invincible’ enemy is impossible, he puts on a noble acceptance or utters a bold defiance. These views are objectively expressed in some of his poems.

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 a noxious condition to which it has been reduced. The grave is an end by itself and there is nothing beyond that.

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From very early days, confronted by the “cruelty of reality,” realising their powerlessness against death, people have been questioning the transient nature of life and raging against fate :

Where has the horse gone? The rider?
The treasure – giver?
The halls of feasting? Where are man’s joys?
The dazzling goblets! The dazzling warriors!
The splendour of the prince!

- (The Wanderer-7-11)

Such an inquiry is profitless. It leads man on inevitably to intensified sorrow and increased disillusion. The most frequently anthologised poem “The groundhog” serves as a vehicle of thought to trigger off and initiate philosophical speculations, metaphysical considerations and a series of unresolved inquiries on mortality and temporality of the groundhog in particular, man and civilization in general.

The composition of the piece originated in “a high state of awareness, in a total charge and commitment of the whole being in about 20 minutes” (How I Write Poetry, 29). The gradual decay with graphic details about physical disappearance and how the poet has been affected from the content of this dramatic situation.

The opening lines of the poem locate the time and place for the drama which springs from the tension between the observing poet and the observed object over a considerable period of time. In the first two lines, the antithetical concepts – life and death are juxtaposed. Placing of dissimilar things together enhances naturally and simultaneously the great affect as it is always exemplified in Shakespearean tragedies by the introduction of comic scenes.

The opening with suggestion of rich landscape of the spring season, a season of prosperity when the gardens smile at the sky gets a promising and atmosphere. After keeping the reader in anticipation of life and fertility, the poet subtly introduces “the groundhog lying dead.” It is the month of June, when life is expected. The poet, in his intensity of life encounters the creature at “the journey’s end” (Shakespeare). The poet’s mood runs counter to the setting. The paradox is part of reality.

The inversion of the syntactical order in the third line heightens the effect and shows how his senses have been stupefied. The shudder on him is not a mere outward reaction of having

seen something unpleasant but it has run deep into the analytic mind which instantly ponders upon, beyond our “naked frailty.”

The use of plural possessive “our” in the fourth line identifies man with the animal world. The poet carefully maintain the paradoxical setting throughout – “the senseless change” against the “vigorous summer.” The concurrent existence of life and death is the mystery of reality.

“Aroused by what he sees, the poet obsessively decides to investigate further the relentless progress of destruction.” The process of decay initiated by death, continued by nature, is intensified by the maggots. The antagonistic nature too has lent a hand :

Inspecting close his maggots’ might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick. (p, 115)

The poet is torn between the conflicting ambivalent impulses – “half with loathing” and “half with a strange love.” His loathing is natural at such an ugly sight but fascination is strange. He detests the mighty maggots because they have intrigued with nature in bringing about the decay. Even the stick shows its dissent at such a repulsive sight. He realises the futility of his violent act. The reaction cannot better be expressed except in Eberhart’s own words:

The fever arose, became a flame
And vigour circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling. (CP,130)

The poet is awakened to a still more frightening experience at the seething energy of the carcass and he is taken aback by the all consuming power in nature. This arouses a frightening understanding of the uncertainty of his own experiences.

The poet makes all possible efforts to appease his inquiring and raging mind and to master his roused passion against decay. He stands there as a passive observer and keeps his reverence for knowledge. The inquisitive “scientific knowledge” is soothed and the sentimentalist’s easily-tickled passion is quietened. How he assumes the role of a serene philosopher and a detached interceder and kneels down, “praying for the joy in the sight of decay.” The poet prays for joy in himself amidst decay.

During his second visit in autumn, there is a scenic change in keeping with the atmosphere, an altered outlook in the poet too. The phrase “strict of eye” may qualify the poet as well as the season. The poet’s attitude – like that of the scientist and sentimentalist is cast down, and narrowed down to realistic outlook. The dual nature of the autumn season is clearly drawn, it is the season of harvest and plenty.

It is a prelude to winter. As usual, the antithetical nature of the season and the situation involved are placed adjointly. There is no harvest, nothing promising but only “the bony sudden hulk” remains and the year has lost its meaning. The trees start shedding their leaves. The “Sap” of the poet’s energy too is lost. In his labyrinthine thoughts of deep intellectual involvement, the poet remains aloof with the air of detachment, confined to wisdom alone. The passionate response has turned into a slightly ‘awful’ wisdom.

During his third visit to the spot, the summer has resumed its “massive and burning” life lost once. The signs of decay and life are completely gone in the dead animal and it has been transformed and transmitted into a beautiful piece of architecture, similar to that of the second process of decay in “The Virgin”:

But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture (15 - 19)

Now the poet cuts a stick never to poke at it, but only to serve as a walking stick, an object of support and backing to the old man; “Full of wise saws and modern instances” (Shakespeare). Not that the poet has grown old but he has gained wisdom.

Exactly after a lapse of three years, since his first encounter, he discovers to his amazement that there is no sign of the groundhog at all. The poet is puzzled by loss of life and loss of indication of any life which awakens his emotions. He cannot help feeling for himself and for the civilization of the whole world to which he is linked. He comes to the full realization, that the drying up of life, does not pertain to that particular object alone, but it is the universal phenomenon.

As he stands in the “whirling summer,” he thinks of the civilization of China and Greece, accepted to be outstanding; Alexander, the greatest conqueror of the world Montaigne, the French philosopher and St. Theresa, the religious mystic who practiced love. No doubt it is a

dreadful realisation, not only to the poet but also to the readers, even the things one holds so dear like the greatest civilization, the political triumph, the philosophical musings and the love extended to the fellow men motivated by love of God, pass away. If these are not permanent, what is permanency for?

The thought of the dead animal has not only touched him deeply but impelled him to meditate upon great persons who embody love of power, love of knowledge, and love of God. The poet seems to imply the futility of all love here. He turns away with a “withered heart” because his inquiry, into the mystery of existence and disappearance, remains unresolved.

As a keen observer of nature, Eberhart is sharply interested in the objects around. Animal emblems must have prompted insect emblem also. The dry husk of the sloughed skin of a cicada, leads the poet to consider life, change and immortality. The title “The Largess” is deeply ironic because though it is suggestive of some gift or bestowal from God, the only “gift” left is subjection to fleeting time. The poet has no perception of any bestowal in the cicada’s life and utters a cry of disappointment and disillusionment :

What eternal hovers in

Him : speak are you corpse? (16 - 17)

The miracle of the fly’s organism and the path of its fleeting existence – build the poem’s complexity.

“Indian Insect Life” gives interesting facts about the insect. It is a homoplean plant bug with two pairs of similar flimsy membranous wings. The chirping of the cicada is characteristic but it is quite unusual that only the males chirp and so the saying goes – “Happy is the cicada’s life for he has a voiceless wife.”

It is quite amazing to note that in the early days, even time and seasons were calculated by the regular insistent chirp of the cicada and it changes its intensity as the season or the day becomes hot. This insect is the symbol of life and of fleeting time, and one is reminded of the lines :

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

(Macbeth V.5. 24-28)

Life becomes purposeless and meaningless. It is quite but proper on the part of the poet to have chosen the insect to stand for fleeting time.

The poet has successfully accomplished his encounter with the dry husk of the lifeless cicada. The “nymphal skin” reveals the delicate and fragile nature of the wings. The third and the fourth lines build the conspicuous contrast in size between the onlooker and the object viewed. It is so insignificant before the narrator that he has to “Let down my eyes to him.” In spite of its insignificance, the poet attributes human qualities and refers to the fragile wind in terms of respect and regard (“him”).

Instantly the sense of fear has encroached upon the poet and he is made to think of his own fate and mortality. Does the sad plight of the cicada drive his thought to his own end or is he cautious lest his more look would harm the most slender object? The following stanza given the answer :

Les the look I gave
Was death's loving me,
To every memory have,
That himself he see. (5-9)

It is ascribed to every memory that it should foresee its end in somebody's demise.

In the III stanza the poet is so much wonder-struck at the “marvellous crispness” which is a “perfect a structure.” Intuitively he sees perfection, wonder and beauty even on such brittle little creatures. “Thin as matter is. It has its wondrous lure.” There is immense fascination and attraction even in the thinnest membrane. Enticed by its perfection, he holds it in his outstretched arm “in grassy feel.”

He ponders over the possibility of any enduring quality in that “final form.” He considers that to be the final form because it is the last of the organs survived in that decayed body or the poet might have conceived that there is no renewal to this form and even if there is it cannot retain its original form and its present individuality.

The following stanzas pose many questions. The poet wants to probe deep into the mystery of nature and brevity of human life. He wants to know whether he can let it mingle with the vibrant winds or “Must I not use you / Then in every desire?” The poet could not reconcile himself to the thought of change and mortality over such a fragile object.

The adjectives used carry greater weight – ‘black’ (lifeless) ‘delicate’ (fragile) and ‘defined’ (because its days are numbered) and ‘crinkled’ husk. Unable to find any answer, the poem ends with the strong disillusioned note eventually manifested in the last stanza :

My eyes soothe over him,
My hand tremble with force
What eternal hovers in
Him : Speak, are you corpse? (10-4)

There should be another convincing and interesting reason for the choice the poet has made above all. Among all creatures and insects, he has chosen cicada most significantly because it spends seventeen long years as a subterranean larva – the longest period any animal, creature or insect has and when it emerges as an adult, it is very pathetic that it leads a comparatively brief life. So the brevity of existence is succinctly suggested by cicada.

What is the meaning of its brief existence? How would anyone account for its cessation? The question remains unanswered, and along with Dylan Thomas one has only to “Rage, rage, against the dying of light.”

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