

IRVIN EHRENPREIS

POETRIES

OF

AMERICA



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Essays on the Relation of Character to Style

Edited and with an Introduction by DANIEL ALBRIGHT

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In most cases, the essays here collected had no sources specified for quoted material. It was difficult to trace obscure passages from interviews, early drafts of poems, uncollected letters, and so forth, cited in Professor Ehrenpreis's texts. Patricia Welsch of the University of Virginia and Wendy Bashant of the University of Rochester have helped greatly in the thousand small exasperations that attend a project such as this. I must also thank Lawrence Garretson of the University of Virginia, who risked his eyesight and his sanity poring over microfilms, manuscripts, and so on—indeed anyone who enjoys this book is in his debt. His discretion, wisdom, and sheer will to get things right are reflected on many pages of this text. Finally I thank her whom I always thank, and never thank enough, Karin Larson.

DANIEL ALBRIGHT
Rochester, N.Y.

INTRODUCTION



The world agrees that the biographies of monks, imbeciles, and literary critics do not need to be told. Yet I think that many readers of this book would like to know something about its author.


Irvin Ehrenpreis was born in Manhattan in 1920, the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland and White Russia. As a child he was small and attractive; he was treated well and encouraged to develop his remarkable intellectual gifts. He attended a school for bright children, where he did not receive excellent grades; by his own account he had no great ambition when young. His father was the owner of a boys' clothing store who went bankrupt in the Great Depression; afterwards he operated a newsstand. There, after school, Irvin sold newspapers and magazines; in later life he was pleased to think that some of his articles were published in magazines he had himself once vended. He graduated from the City College of New York at the age of eighteen—but he regarded this acceleration as a great error, and would fly into a rage when he heard about children who were promoted beyond the grade appropriate to their age. After his graduation he had no strong sense of direction. He applied to several medical schools but was rejected by all. He taught English, Latin, and history at a rural high school, to students not much younger than himself. Then he attended Columbia Teachers College, from which he received a Ph.D. in education in 1944. He spoke of his years at Columbia as an exhilarating time: he took

courses in physics as well as literature, he read *Finnegans Wake* as it appeared, he became involved with various left-wing political activities. These last were, I think, a slight embarrassment to him as an adult—he remained politically liberal but became a strong anti-Communist.

His first college teaching position was at the University of Indiana, where he stayed for many years, until he joined the faculty of the University of Virginia in 1964. Both Charlottesville and Bloomington offered a pleasing contrast to New York City. He spoke of Bloomington, Indiana, in the same idyllic tone that Theocritus used to describe Sicily, and liked to call Charlottesville “the Athens of Albemarle County,” with a mocking but affectionate grimace. Virginia offered several advantages over Indiana, not all of them immediately apparent. First, the chairman of the English Department in those days was Fredson Bowers, a bibliographer for whom Irvin Ehrenpreis had great respect, and who was eager to recruit him. Second, his wife Anne was struggling with cancer, which required medical facilities beyond those easily available in southern Indiana. Third, the landed gentry of Albemarle County offered a delicious spectacle of extravagance and squirearchical affectation. Fourth, Virginia was beginning to attract a number of fine graduate students. As a teacher Irvin Ehrenpreis was famous for a somewhat terrifying classroom presence: he would call on students by name, transfix them by his gaze, and demand specific answers. Even bright students who adored him sometimes felt wrung dry by the end of class.

He had a striking presence out of class as well. Most extremely intelligent people find ways of softening themselves to the world at large: every academic knows a distinguished chemist who plays in a Dixieland band, or a historian of Roman law who can reel off the batting averages of the whole starting lineup of the 1967 Red Sox, or someone similar. But Irvin Ehrenpreis had none of these mollifying ways. He was always intense—his brother once said that Irvin would have been intense even before the age of one, if there had been anything to be intense about. Short and thin, fidgety, abrupt, he rarely walked if he could find an excuse to run. He spoke rapidly in a carefully modulated voice, in correct, organized sentences and paragraphs; during the several hundred hours that I heard him speak, he committed perhaps

three grammatical errors. His face typically seemed to express surprise, as if he were perpetually startled by the wickedness and folly of men. In his company, other people seemed half-asleep by comparison.

 This book is a collection of essays on American poetry. Most of these essays were book reviews, either of poets' biographies (Whitman and Dickinson), or of literary criticism (Pound and Eliot), or of original books of poetry as they appeared. In 1982 Irvin Ehrenpreis prepared a typescript of eighteen of these essays, carefully arranged and edited, with the title *Poetries of America: Essays on the Relation of Character to Style*. He talked of publishing it; I do not know why he never did so. I have added a nineteenth essay, "Eliot III," a review published in 1984 that I am confident he would have wished to include here. I have also appended some published replies to those who objected to his comments.

As a book reviewer he lived by a code. Among his tenets were (1) do not write a wholly negative review of an original book of poetry; (2) always hold something back. The rationale for the first tenet was that an altogether bad book of poetry should not be reviewed in the first place. To errant scholars he felt no need to show mercy; but to misguided poets he tried to be kind (the reader may judge for himself the degree of success). The rationale for the second tenet was that some particularly shameful error should be left unmentioned in a review, so that, if the reviewee objected to the reviewer's treatment, a bludgeon was readily at hand. In general, his reviews—of Augustan studies as well as of modern poetry—are somewhat cautious. In private conversation he often made much more severe complaints than the reviews declare. But in his replies to objections, he let himself go—more of his wit and vivacity are manifest.

In almost every essay in this book, certain aspects of the poems are shown to be congruent with biographical details of the poet's life. Thus we are told that the hymnlike stanza that Emily Dickinson used in most of her poems is related to the disarming facade of her public character—a plain and childlike exterior that hides a bold inner content. Perhaps I can show that the theory of poetry advanced in this

book is congruent with the biographical details of Irvin Ehrenpreis's life.

The central assumption of his critical method was that content is prior to form—that poets have something to say, and then choose a literary style either as an appropriate, or as an ironically inappropriate, expression. This assumption is anti-Romantic in that it contradicts the belief of Coleridge and Walter Pater that form and content are ideally inseparable; but both Dryden and T. S. Eliot would have found it congenial. It is in no way strange that the child of Eastern European immigrants, with little early participation in high culture, whose vivid personality must have been developed consciously and carefully, would have thought that style was not inherent in a man but a kind of artificial constraint. Irvin Ehrenpreis's handwriting showed the labor he expended to achieve a personal style. He wrote slowly, in a perfect italic script—his son once said that his father used to madden him (when he needed money) by taking what seemed like hours to sign checks. But when hurried, his handwriting degenerated suddenly into sheer scrawl—there was no middle ground between the unintelligible and the overintelligible. I take this as a sign of a kind of chaos underlying the achieved persona. Excited, he could resemble Albert Einstein as played by Jack Nicholson.

Again and again in these essays we find the assumption that poetic form is a bulwark against the chaos of the poet's feelings. In "Berryman II," for example, we are told that the poet's stanza form, though loose, is "rigid enough to make significant barriers to the waves of feeling." In "Lowell I," the critic complains of the arbitrary, seemingly purposeless contrast in Lowell's early poetry between the tight stanza form and the violence and bitterness of feeling. In the essay on Elizabeth Bishop—possibly the finest piece in this collection—we are shown how the poet assuages grief and loss by arranging colorful bits and scraps into a design. This is the Ehrenpreis model of the poetic act: dangerous, overwhelming feelings are tamed and clarified by meter, rhyme, metaphor, art. Perhaps this is clearest in his essay "The Powers of Alexander Pope" (*New York Review of Books*, 20 December 1979, not included here), where he described how Pope's neat couplets arise from creative wells of "pain, confusion, misshapen birth and growth, delu-

sive transformation"—the unborn forms in the Cave of Dulness, the phantasmagoria of the Cave of Spleen.

One of these essays, "Poetry and Language," is in fact a kind of polemic, urging poets not to abandon the traditional resources of art through an impatient desire to do away with all that impedes free expression, or through a wish to imitate the authentic shapelessness of reality. But in fact Irvin Ehrenpreis was a less conservative critic than this essay suggests: he (like all men of an Augustan temperament, valuing the clear, the agreeable, the spruce) was fascinated with chaos, and wrote sympathetically about poets who present raw feeling, feeling unmediated by poetic form. Indeed he considered highly cooked poetry slightly un-American. Thus he described Whitman as achieving great success by rejecting conscious artifice:

It is a mistake to measure rhythms or to trace pattern of sound in his lines. Whitman deliberately held back from the forms that Tennyson and Longfellow relied on.

There is a level of intuitive expression, just above the dark chaos from which all creation starts. At this level Whitman found he could trust his genius.

Similarly, Irvin Ehrenpreis thought that Stevens's predilection for nonsense syllables arose from his desire to give a voice to reality before it had been digested, shaped by the conscious mind, or from his desire to express the unconscious self: "The inmost self is subrational and prelinguistic. It holds the feelings and tastes that move us to speech, not those that issue from speech. Stevens's nonsense syllables bypass the conscious, literary, reflective mind. . . . [A certain memory] takes us back to ancestral impressions, first impressions, the primordial response to the world, without myth, symbolism, human associations." In "Heaney, Ammons, Strand," we are offered a contrast of the formal European Seamus Heaney with the formless American A. R. Ammons, whose poems are so radically enjambed that it is difficult to see any reason behind his line breaks: "Often, Heaney writes in conventional forms. Ammons does not. . . . The American tends to confront the universe directly. As an artist, he gets little support from liturgical

forms or from the songs and hymns that often provide patterns for Irish and British verse. . . . It may be significant that Lowell [who influenced Heaney] was at one time drawn to the Roman Catholic Church, for which mediation is far more important than it is for Protestantism." And in the final essay, on Sylvia Plath, Irvin Ehrenpreis regarded her poems as the speech of an infant self incapable of establishing a secure position in the universe, a fragmentary, jejune, easily dismembered being. In all these cases the critic attempted to understand a poem as a record of the poet's unconscious and immediate responses to the world. Sometimes we hear a note of disapproval of the poet who, instead of writing a poem, simply offers to his readers the verbal equivalent of dough or protoplasm; but often there is respect for the ingenuity of poets who can gesture imaginatively toward what Wallace Stevens called the World without Imagination, reality uninflected by human thought.

Irvin Ehrenpreis's preoccupation with biography is part of a general preoccupation with the imaginative prehistory of poetry: what is the nature of a poem before it is actually written? He used biography as a tool for reconstructing the inner dialogue that led to a poet's choice of theme and form—few critics in any age have achieved such brilliant results with this method. He laid more emphasis on the process of composition than on the finished product—he had little interest in the poem as verbal icon or well-wrought urn. He liked to speak of the poem as an enactment of the process of insight (this phrase occurs in the Pound essay): "Poems like Elizabeth Bishop's 'Poem' . . . Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour,' . . . and James Merrill's 'The Thousand and Second Night' are suitable models [for poets today], not because they reveal any scandal about the poet but because they involve world and self in the fascinating, funny, terrible work of connecting and disconnecting the immediate sensibility and the experiences that produced it. A group of such poems is the grandest epic we can use" ("Warren I"). The poet's life and his poem are beheld as mutually sustaining, mutually nourishing, delicately groping at each other's truths. A poem is less an end than a means of inquiring into the meanings of experience. Although Irvin Ehrenpreis insisted that many questions of interpretation could not be settled by biographical evidence, he often preferred those

lyric poems in which the poet's persona differed little from the self inferred by biographical information. He did not usually enjoy poems of rhetorical self-inflation, or poems excessively ambitious in scope. Indeed a continual theme of these essays is the crusade against the long narrative or epic poem: "the stronger the narrative, the weaker the verse" ("Merrill").

No critic is universally sensitive, pan-empathic, and there are weaknesses to be found in this book. I am uneasy about Irvin Ehrenpreis's lack of curiosity about the poetic or philosophical theories of the poets he criticized. He insisted again and again (I think correctly) that an author's "persuasive theoretical grounds for his literary practice" do not prove "that what the man writes is good" ("Ashbery and Justice"); and that "a coherent design is not necessarily a mark of literary value" ("Eliot I"). And I respect him deeply for his attempt to take an "independent point of view" ("Eliot I") in evaluating Eliot's achievement, instead of judging Eliot by principles derived from Eliot's critical essays. And yet I believe that his essays on Eliot and Pound would have been better if better informed by knowledge of Eliot's dissertation on F. H. Bradley, or Pound's theory of vorticism, and so forth. A poet's ideas are also part of his total effort. The Pound essay is the least impressive in the book: Irvin Ehrenpreis's revulsion against Pound's anti-Semitism distorted his responses to the poetry. In this case the direction indicated by the subtitle (*Essays on the Relation of Character to Style*) led to the too easy conclusion that a poor character makes for a shapeless and vulgar style. (Distaste for less accomplished poets, however, could be more productive. The last pages of "Poetry and Language" contain a denunciation of Gary Snyder that is a miracle of invective, worthy of *The Dunciad* itself.)

Some readers of this book will object to its treatment of John Ashbery and Mark Strand. Irvin Ehrenpreis did not have great respect for the work of either poet. This was perhaps inevitable, since he believed that lyric poetry was essentially mimetic in character and communal in purpose: "It is . . . this turning on itself, the movement toward solipsism, that weakens Strand's work. Many of the poems seem written to exemplify designs . . . but not to illuminate an experience so that readers might match it with their own. If I recommend the short lyric of

self-definition as the proper modern poem, it is not because the character of a poet is the most important focus of a literary work. It is because through this frame the poet can describe human nature and the world" ("Heaney, Ammons, Strand"). Irvin Ehrenpreis believed that lyric poetry had a moral mission, to unite mankind in shared responses to experience. He could not easily approve of poets whom he judged to be morally defective (like Pound and Snyder), or of poets whose work was so involved and private that it had no public, moral aspect whatsoever. If Irvin Ehrenpreis erred in this matter, it was the error of a generous and grave man who believed in the importance of art.

I regret that he never wrote a preface to this collection. I can, however, try to supply one from an unusual source. During the mid-1980s, Irvin Ehrenpreis spent his summers at the University of Münster, Germany (the home of an institute of Swift scholarship now named in his honor), where he and a German colleague, Dr. Heinz Vienken, decided to compile an anthology of German translations of modern American poems. He undertook this project with great zeal, and by the time of his death he had carefully annotated a good number of poems and had left notes toward a preface. This preface, if completed, could have easily served for this collection as well as for the anthology. I offer here a construction of these notes—the last paragraph is very doubtful, but most of the rest is clear.



The history of American poetry can be discussed in terms of three traditions. The first is conventional didactic verse in which the poet uses familiar forms and correct language in order to convey moral implications that challenge common attitudes. Some of the subtlest, most disturbing poets belong to this line: Dickinson and Frost, for example.

The second tradition is that of high, aesthetic literature embodied above all in the Symbolist tradition. The poets avoid didacticism, celebrate the creative imagination, strive for musical versification, and are not afraid to be difficult. Poe (especially in French translation), Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens are examples of this line.

Finally, a strong tendency, starting early in the country's history, is

the effort to elaborate native themes opposing America to Europe, to use American images and speech. This tradition found its best-known expression in the work of Walt Whitman, whose use of free verse and a bold vocabulary went along with a delight in the American landscape, pride in the potentialities of his countrymen, but disappointment with their political and cultural institutions. From Whitman the line to W. C. Williams is direct, and Williams has had an incalculable influence on poets of the last forty years.

Behind these developments stand certain representative figures whose thought may not have been familiar to all modern American poets but whose works embody fundamental elements that keep reappearing in the poetry. The most important is Emerson, a deliberately unsystematic thinker who directly inspired Whitman. Emerson, William James, and John Dewey were formative influences on American education and helped to shape the view of human nature most characteristic of the country, a view to which the poets respond with strong sympathy or hostility, though they are not always conscious of its sources. The themes of personal identity and national and private self-definition are typical of Western literature during the last seventy years but especially of American poetry, in which they rival the old themes of death, love, and religious faith.

The essays in this book illustrate the concern with self-definition that lies behind the best work of American poetry. One can relate the various forms of the impulse to Emerson, who inspired and first recognized the greatness of Whitman. Other poets may not always have admired Emerson. But for a nation of immigrants, self-definition is always a peculiar obsession, and the forms in which Emerson explored it provide a natural frame for a survey of American poetry.

In "The Poet," "The American Scholar," and his journals, Emerson dwelled on the dangers of an imposed culture, a canon of books to be mastered, a set of moral laws to be learned and obeyed. He knew better than most men how much evil resides in the heart of man, but he also believed that no good was reliable if its roots started elsewhere.

Clearly Whitman profited from the notion of a national culture that could be developed afresh, without the dead hand of the past; and Whitman's free verse, where form is determined by meaning, might

have been more difficult to achieve without the example of Emerson's ideas and his rapturous prose. But the other two traditions also owe much to Emerson, who was both a moralist and a kind of aesthete. When Emerson said, in "Nature," that "beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue," he invited moral poets to find the Good in the American landscape. Another passage from "Nature" shows that Emerson anticipated the Symbolist line as well: "Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping" (Frederic I. Carpenter, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 15). This is an expression of the mood of much of Wallace Stevens's poetry. Like Stevens, Emerson could see the world around him as a painting, as if there were some pressure toward design in nature herself. George Santayana, who taught at Harvard when Stevens attended the university, wrote of Emerson, "Imagination is his single theme. . . . Emerson traces in every sphere . . . the self-expression of the Soul in the forms of Nature and of society" (Carpenter, p. xl). The high aesthetic tradition, the moral tradition, and the native American tradition are all comprehended in Emerson's thought.



This sober preface does not prepare the reader for the energy or the authority of this book. Running through these pages there is an undercurrent of feeling that sometimes seems in excess of the provocation offered by the texts under discussion. In the foreword to the third volume of his masterpiece, the biography of Swift, Irvin Ehrenpreis wrote: "The one who would have felt the strongest pleasure in the completion of this book is dead. But readers who follow my account of Swift's response to the loss of Esther Johnson may wish to know that I could not help thinking of Anne, my wife, as I wrote." This covert grappling with personal emotion through literary research is not rare among critics. The fond, lingering, elegiac summaries of Emily Hale's role in T. S. Eliot's life (in the Eliot essays) may indicate that the critic was reminded of some person in his own life. Similarly, the out-

bursts of bitterness and aggressiveness may suggest a spirit that seeks an occasion to vent itself. In his lecture "Why Literature Should Be Taught" (1958), he said that "as far as I can judge, essential human nature is neither good nor neutral."

One of the reasons why this collection of essays has unique force is that Irvin Ehrenpreis knew and consulted with some of the most distinguished poets discussed in these pages. Robert Lowell seems to have valued his opinion when revising poems; and Elizabeth Bishop was a friend of his. I once had lunch with her and Irvin in a seedy cafeteria, of the sort that bears a certificate of commendation from *McCall's* magazine, 1956, and I can testify to their warmth and ease in each other's company. There was a sort of game, not to make any conversation inappropriate to the decor of the restaurant: so they talked, deadpan, about the weather and the difficulty of gardening in warm climates and the rest, with only the faintest gestures of irony.

Conversation with Irvin Ehrenpreis was unlike conversation with other men. Even when wholly relaxed, he spoke in periods, as if he were wrapping birthday presents, proffering his matter in a beautiful gift box with a bow on top. Here is a specimen—I had just complained about some astonishing mistake I had found in a scholar's annotation to a novel:

The standards of annotation are high these days. Soon scholars will be providing footnotes to conjunctions and prepositions as well as to nouns. On the other hand, it is difficult not to make mistakes. When Anne [his wife] was editing [Charlotte Smith's] *Emmeline* she added a gloss to *Côte Rôti*, noting that it meant a rib roast. You know better, don't you? *You* are a connoisseur. After the edition was published, we spent the summer in France. No one knew where we were but Cecil Lang [our friend, the scholar of Swinburne and Tennyson; he lived a few houses away from Irvin]. In a small country inn we were surprised to learn that someone had sent to our table a bottle of wine. It was from Cecil. It was a bottle of *Côte Rôti*. He had written to the innkeeper from America.

After hearing such a story, you were expected to present a similarly prepared gift in exchange. Like most Americans I had grown up believing that all conversation was stichomythia, and it took time to adjust to this style.

It was good to know him. He was not the sort of man who liked to expound a philosophy of living, but I remember a time when he said that, even though he was a Jew by birth, there were some parables in the New Testament that meant more to him than any in the Old: the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14), for one, and the parable of the man who instructs his servant to scour the streets and byways looking for strangers to invite to the feast (Luke 14:16). I think that that parable, more than anything else, explains what he hoped to be as a teacher. He would sometimes startle his students and friends by asking them personal questions—as if he were trying to memorize the father's occupation and the mother's maiden name, a body of facts about everyone he met. But this was his way of issuing his own passport, of extending an invitation to the intellectual feast over which he presided. As this book of essays shows, he was a democrat of the intellect: "The old humanistic ideal [is] sometimes imagined to be aristocratic, but [is] really available to anyone with the mind and the will: this is intellectual and aesthetic culture, comprehending poetry and the other arts, history, and philosophy. A mark of this culture was that (contrary to some snobbish illusions) it could be passed on from Greek to Roman, from slave to noble, from antiquity to Renaissance. . . . It united men over the barriers of social institutions" ("Pound"). I think that this belief had the intensity of religious conviction. He was not a religious man: during his wife's terrible, interminable dying, he used to refer to God as The Blunderer. Yet perhaps it is not surprising that, a little before his unexpected death—he fell down a staircase at the University of Münster, after a long weekend of work on the German-American anthology—he had begun to attend Roman Catholic Mass. My first thought, when I learned that he had died, was that the world's intelligence quotient had measurably sunk; but in fact, through his network of students and admirers, he succeeded in populating the world with people who try to emulate his intelligence, alertness, and generosity.