Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

76

ISSN 1052-4851

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 76

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

THOMSON
GALE

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn. • Waterville, Maine • London

THOMSON
GALE

Poetry Criticism, Vol. 76

Project Editor
Michelle Lee

Editorial
Kathy D. Darrow, Jeffrey W. Hunter, Jelena O. Krstović, Thomas J. Schoenberg, Noah Schusterbauer, Lawrence J. Trudeau, Russel Whitaker

Data Capture
Frances Monroe, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services
Factiva, Inc.

Rights and Acquisitions
Edna Hedblad, Lisa Kincade, Shalice Shah-Caldwell, and Timothy Sisler

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Lezlie Light, Mike Logusz, Dan Newell, Christine O'Bryan

Composition and Electronic Capture
Tracey Matthews

Manufacturing
Rhonda Dover

Associate Product Manager
Marc Cormier

For more information, contact
Thomson Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
Or you can visit our internet site at http://www.gale.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 91-118494

ISBN-13: 978-0-7876-8710-6
ISBN-10: 0-7876-8710-3
ISSN 1052-4851

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Thomson Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Thomson Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

Organization of the Book

Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *PC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *PC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *PC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing *Poetry Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Linkin, Harriet Kramer. "The Language of Speakers in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" *Romanticism Past and Present* 10, no. 2 (summer 1986): 5-24. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 79-88. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series
Thomson Gale
27500 Drake Road

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
1-800-347-4253 (GALE)
Fax: 248-699-8054

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *PC.* Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *PC,* VOLUME 76, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

Americas Review, v. 24, spring-summer, 1996. Copyright © 1997 by the *Americas Review.* Arte Público Press.—University of Houston. Reproduced by permission.—***Ball State University Forum,*** v. 27, winter, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by Ball State University. Reproduced by permission.—***Chaucer Review,*** v. 35, 2001; v. 36, 2002. Copyright © 2001, 2002 by the Pennsylvania State University. Both reproduced by permission of the publisher.—***Concerning Poetry,*** v. 12, spring, 1979. Copyright © 1979 by Western Washington University. Reproduced by permission.—***Confluencia,*** v. 15, spring, 2000. Copyright © 1998 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Northern Colorado. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—***Contemporary Poetry,*** v. 2, autumn, 1977 for "The Walls of Wisdom: The Rational Faculty as Fortress and Prison in Eberhart's 'The Groundhog'" by William Bedford Clark. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Exemplaria,*** v. 10, fall, 1998; v. 13, spring, 2001. Copyright © 1998, 2001 by Pegasus Press, University of North Carolina at Asheville. Both reproduced by permission.—***Explicator,*** v. 22, May, 1964; v. 27, November, 1968; v. 30, December, 1971; v. 32, January, 1974; v. 43, winter, 1985. Copyright © 1964, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1985 by the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. All reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—***Latin American Literary Review,*** v. 32, January-June, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by *Latin American Literary Review.* Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—***Medium Ævum,*** v. 68, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by the Contributors. Reproduced by permission.—***Modern Language Notes,*** v. 119, March, 2004. Copyright © 2004 by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Reproduced by permission.—***Modern Language Quarterly,*** v. 57, June, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Edited and translated by John D. Blanco. Used by permission of the publisher.—***Parnassus,*** v. 1, spring-summer, 1973 for "In the Fields of Imagination (MacLeish, Eberhart, Levertov, Kumin)" by Ralph Mills, Jr. Copyright © 1973 by the Poetry in Review Foundation, NY. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Romance Notes,*** v. 10, spring, 1969. Reproduced by permission.—***Shenandoah,*** v. 15, summer, 1964 for "An Interview with Richard Eberhart" by Denis Donoghue. Copyright © 1964 by Denis Donoghue. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and Georges Borchardt, Inc., for the author.—***South Atlantic Review,*** v. 50, November, 1985. Copyright © 1985 by the South Atlantic Modern Language Association. Reproduced by permission.—***Speculum,*** v. 57, October, 1982. Copyright © 1982 by the Medieval Academy of America. Reproduced by permission.—***Studies in the Age of Chaucer,*** v. 25, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by the New Chaucer Society, the Ohio State University, Columbus. Reproduced by permission.—***World Literature Today,*** v. 76, summer-autumn, 2002. Copyright © 2002 by *World Literature Today.* Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *PC,* VOLUME 76, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Benson, Larry D. From ***Art and Tradition in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.** Rutgers University Press, 1965. Copyright © 1965 by Rutgers, the State University. Reproduced by permission of Rutgers University Press.—Blanch, Robert J. From "Religion and Law in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" in ***Approaches to Teaching* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.** Edited by Miriam Youngerman Miller and Jane Chance. The Modern Language Association of America, 1986. Copyright © 1986 by the Modern Language Association of America. Reproduced by permission of the Modern Language Association of America.—Burrow, J. A. From ***A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.** Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965. Copyright © 1965. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.—Foner, Philip S. From the Introduction to ***José Martí: Major Poems.*** Edited by Philip S. Foner; translated by Elinor Randall. Holmes & Meier, 1982. Copyright © 1982 by Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Gordon, Lois. From "Richard Eberhart: Romantic Poet and Love Child," in ***The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama.*** Edited by Warren French. Everett/Edwards, 1970. Copyright © 1970 by Warren French. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the

Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel
Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows
Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel
Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant
Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry
Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin
Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula
Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon
Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher
Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller
Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

Contents

Richard Eberhart
1904-2005

American poet, playwright, essayist, and editor.

INTRODUCTION

A Pulitzer Prize winner, Eberhart was a highly regarded lyric poet whose writing career spanned more than six decades. He is known for poetry that explores the fundamental issues of existence in the tradition of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Eberhart was born in Austin, Minnesota, on April 5, 1904, to Lena Lowenstein and Alpha LaRue Eberhart, a vice-president at Hormel Meat Packing Company. The family was quite prosperous and Eberhart and his two siblings were raised at Burr Oaks, the family's forty-acre estate, which served as inspiration for a later volume of poetry. Eberhart began writing poems in high school, where he was an accomplished athlete and participated in a wide variety of extracurricular activities. In 1921, shortly after his high school graduation, Eberhart's idyllic life was shattered by his mother's death from lung cancer and the loss of the family's fortune. In 1922 he entered the University of Minnesota, but transferred to Dartmouth the following year, graduating in 1926 with a B.A. Eberhart then took a job as a floorwalker at a Chicago department store, but shortly thereafter traveled to San Francisco and then around the world as a deck hand on a series of tramp steamers. In October of 1927, he arrived in England and enrolled at St. John's College, Cambridge, where he met a number of important literary figures. By the time he graduated in 1929 with a second B.A., he was on his way to being an established poet, having published in a number of periodicals. A year later he produced a long autobiographical poem, *A Bravery of Earth* (1930), written while he was at Cambridge. Meanwhile, Eberhart returned to the United States, where he worked briefly in a slaughterhouse in New York and wrote book reviews for the *New Republic.* He then took a job as a private tutor to the children of a wealthy family in Florida, and in 1930 he accepted a position tutoring the son of the King of Siam. In 1931, after a year in Germany, Eberhart entered Harvard as a graduate student. He left in 1933 for a teaching job at a private school in Southboro, Massachusetts, where he taught for the next seven years. In 1941 he married Helen Butcher; the couple had two children. He served as a gunnery officer and an instructor in the United States Naval Reserve during World War II and after the war went to work in his wife's family business in Boston. During this period he wrote poetry and became a member of a poetry group started by John Ciardi that also included Archibald MacLeish and Robert Lowell. In 1950 he helped found the Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and began writing verse dramas, including *The Visionary Farms* (1952) and *Devils and Angels* (1956).

In the early 1950s Eberhart began teaching at the college level at a wide variety of institutions including Brown, Swarthmore, Columbia, Princeton, and his alma mater, Dartmouth. He published several books of poetry throughout the next three decades and was awarded a number of prizes for his work, including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award. He also received the Shelley Memorial Award, the Bollingen Prize, the Harriet Monroe Memorial Award, and the Frost Medal; he served as Poet Laureate of New Hampshire from 1979 to 1984. Eberhart died on June 9, 2005, in Hanover, New Hampshire, at the age of 101.

MAJOR WORKS

Eberhart's wide variety of jobs and experiences provided the material for much of his poetry. For example, "Orchard" was inspired by the death of his mother, "The Rape of the Cataract" satirizes his one-time employer, King Prajadhipok, and "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" and "The Brotherhood of Men" deal with World War II. Many of Eberhart's poems meditate on life and death, especially death. These include such poems as "For a Lamb," "The Soul Longs to Return Whence It Came," "I Walked out to the Graveyard to See the Dead," "Suite in Prison," and his best-known poem, "The Groundhog." Other recurring themes found in Eberhart's poetry include man and nature, the mind and the body, darkness and light, and the natural versus the spiritual or transcendent.

Eberhart's first book of poetry, the lengthy, autobiographical *A Bravery of Earth,* was followed six years later by *Reading the Spirit* (1936), which involves the transition to adulthood and the necessity of accepting mortality as part of the maturation process. The volume

was followed by *Song and Idea* (1940), which contains forty-one poems, including "Orchard," detailing the emotions experienced by his family when faced with his mother's impending death. Eberhart continued to publish poetry volumes throughout his lifetime. His most celebrated collections include the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Selected Poems, 1930-1965* (1965) and *Collected Poems, 1930-1976* (1976), which won the National Book Award. His most recent collections are *Collected Poems, 1930-1986* (1988), *Maine Poems* (1989), and *New and Selected Poems, 1930-1990* (1990).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The immediacy of Eberhart's work has been one of the chief subjects of scholarly interest. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. has commented on the directness of Eberhart's style, contending that he is intent on "revealing an experience as if it were unfolding at that very moment" and that his poems never appear to be "the result of passion reconsidered or emotion recollected in tranquillity." Peter L. Thorslev, Jr. lists the distinctive qualities of Eberhart's poetry as "the reliance on first thoughts or on 'inspiration,' the emotional intensity, the earnestness, and the assertive moral and personal sincerity."

Eberhart's poetry is often compared to that of the Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth. Thorslev labels Eberhart a "twentieth-century Romantic," whose autobiographical poem *A Bravery of Earth* is reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Prelude.* Bernard F. Engel (see Further Reading), too, notes the similarity of the two poems and stresses that Eberhart's work "shows no influence from Eliot, Pound, Frost, or Williams; for Eberhart's associations . . . are with the English Romantic poets." Lois Gordon concurs that Eberhart was untouched by Modernism, claiming that for forty years the poet "continued to write lyric poetry in a Romantic vein, in the traditions of Blake, Wordsworth, and Whitman—a poetry relatively free from the great technical innovations of the twentieth century."

The emphasis on death that permeates Eberhart's poetry has been noted by a number of critics. Cleanth Brooks observes "love and death to be the dominant themes, separate or conjoined, in Richard Eberhart's poetry" and emphasizes their prominence in many of his best poems. "For a Lamb" and "The Groundhog" both deal with the carcasses of dead animals and are both "fine poems," according to Engel, who claims that in the latter work "Eberhart presents his most deeply moving recognition of the universality of death." Mills confirms that "death never really loses its essential strangeness of appeal for Eberhart," noting such poems as "Grave Piece" and "Imagining How It Would Be to Be Dead," wherein the poet attempts "to envisage his own dissolution." Other individual poems that explore this persistent theme include "When Golden Flies upon My Carcase Come," "The Soul Longs to Return Whence It Came," and "Rumination," which recalls the death of his grandfather and his father.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

A Bravery of Earth 1930
Reading the Spirit 1936
Song and Idea 1940
A World-View 1941
Poems, New and Selected 1944
Burr Oaks 1947
Brotherhood of Man 1949
An Herb Basket 1950
Selected Poems 1951
Undercliff: Poems 1946-1953 1953
Great Praises 1957
The Oak: A Poem 1957
Collected Poems: 1930-1960 1960
The Quarry: New Poems 1964
Selected Poems, 1930-1965 1965
Thirty-One Sonnets 1967
Shifts of Being: Poems 1968
Three Poems 1968
Fields of Grace 1972
The Groundhog Revisiting 1972
Two Poems 1975
Collected Poems, 1930-1976 1976
Hour, Gnats: New Poems 1977
Surviving 1979
Four Poems 1980
New Hampshire: Nine Poems 1980
Ways of Light: Poems, 1972-1980 1980
Florida Poems 1981
The Long Reach: New and Uncollected Poems, 1948-1984 1984
Collected Poems, 1930-1986 1988
Maine Poems 1989
New and Selected Poems, 1930-1990 1990

Other Major Works

War and the Poet: An Anthology of Poetry Expressing Man's Attitude to War from Ancient Times to the Present [Editor, with Selden Rodman] (poetry) 1945
The Visionary Farms (play) 1952
Triptych (play) 1955

Devils and Angels (play) 1956
The Mad Musician (play) 1962
The Bride of Mantua (play adaptation) 1964
Of Poetry and Poets (essays) 1979

CRITICISM

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (essay date summer-autumn 1962)

SOURCE: Mills, Ralph J., Jr. "Reflections on Richard Eberhart." *Chicago Review* 15, no. 4 (summer-autumn 1962): 81-99.

[*In the following essay, Mills discusses the importance of language and syntax in Eberhart's poetry.*]

What D. H. Lawrence wrote to his friend Catherine Carswell early in 1916 as the rudimentary qualities necessary to poetry in the modern world might easily have been an imaginary description of the working rules behind the poetic practice of Richard Eberhart, whose first book appeared in England the year of Lawrence's death. Lawrence says in his letter: "The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere. Everything can go, but this stark, bare rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry, today."[1] In keeping with the spirit of this dictum, Eberhart is concerned throughout his poetry with revealing an experience as if it were unfolding at that very moment and had to be set down in all its directness, unadorned complexity, and innate lyricism—or lost. The reader is never allowed to believe that any poem by Eberhart is the result of passion reconsidered or emotion recollected in tranquillity. Though a poem may ostensibly treat an experience of the past, the tense of the verb means little or nothing; it is a grudging concession to practicality, for the experience, related with the breathless fury of an immediate sensation, occurs in a timeless *now*—an imaginative moment and space untouched by external measurements—and has an urgency that abolishes our temporal distinctions. This mannerism so fundamental to Eberhart's writing can be seen in his widely anthologized poem **"The Groundhog,"** which gives the impression of a suspended present, though there are time lapses and shifts, and everything has already happened.

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty.
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever arose, became a flame
And Vigour circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.
My stick had done nor good nor harm.
Then I stood silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down on my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.
And so I left; and I returned
In autumn strict of eye, to see
The sap gone out of the groundhog,
But the bony sodden hulk remained.
But the year had lost its meaning,
And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.
Another summer took the fields again
Massive and burning, full of life,
But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture;
I watched them like a geometer,
And cut a walking stick from a birch.
It has been three years, now.
There is no sign of the groundhog.
I stood there in the whirling summer,
My hand capped a withered heart,
And thought of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.[2]

The discovery, departures and returns are all clearly indicated by the poet; and yet we scarcely distinguish between them, because he never permits the overwhelming immediacy of the entire process of decomposition to escape our attention. We jump from one phase of decay to the next with hardly a pause; only near the end of the poem are we brought up short with the recognition of time's passage. And then it is just for an instant before the poet makes his passionate outcry of mind and heart engendered by this experience. Thus the breaks in the time sequence and the fact that the whole series of events belongs to the past are forgotten in the dramatic renewal of the experience by the poem. The happenings of a poem, however we locate them in our familiar temporal scheme, exist always in their own present tense, the tense which is the poem's.

The rough and uneven character of Richard Eberhart's writing over the past three decades, which has been so

frequently remarked upon by both admirers and detractors among his critics, is the inevitable consequence of his approach to poetry, as illustrated in **"The Groundhog,"** and is rooted in his own romantic, inspirational notion of the poetic act. Unlike Eliot, Pound, or even Dylan Thomas, he is apparently not a writer for whom exhaustive revision has much importance. This does not, of course, mean that I think he never alters a word or emends a line, certainly he does;[3] but Eberhart appears to have little patience with extensive reworkings of a poem. He preserves in books only some of the poems published in journals and magazines. In a way, though perhaps not overtly, he is hostile to the idea of pure art, to the institution of literature. With Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, James Agee, Henry Miller, William Faulkner, and other American writers, he shares a distrust of writing that refuses to submit itself to near-domination by the experience it renders. Faulkner's novels, though elaborate in construction, are composed as if the simultaneous flow of thoughts and events would engulf author and characters alike. Henry Miller can retreat no farther from his autobiography, from the pressure of his life, than an occasional fantasy. And Agee, in the prefatory remarks to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* specifically disavows the artistic purpose. The reality of experience is what matters for these writers: how to close the distance between book and occurrence. The beginning of his "Notes on Poetry," included in John Ciardi's *Mid-Century American Poets,* offers at least a glimpse of Eberhart's understanding of the poet's mental operations; these are determined to a large degree, or so it would seem, by forces and accidents outside the poet's control:

> A poet does what he can do. Poetry is dynamic, Protean. In the rigors of composition it seems to me that the poet's mind is a filament informed with the irrational vitality of energy as it was discovered in our time in quantum mechanics. The quanta may shoot off any way. (You breathe in maybe God.)[4]

This hardly looks like the theory of composition endorsed by the literary establishment of the day. Yet Eberhart is assuredly not so irrational in his composition as we might think from this statement, and there are plenty of poems to prove it. However, I can imagine someone being stodgy and foolish enough to point to Eberhart's inspirational and vitalistic aesthetic, and then to his worst poetic failures, and expect you to see how—obviously—the one bred the others. But Eberhart's successes are dependent on the same poetics. His writing is always and everywhere idiosyncratic, and that accounts for some of its strength. At his peak, he acquires an intensity of focus on his material—whatever it might be—that is matched by just a few of his contemporaries.

The gaze this poet turns on his experience is naked, so that he writes unreservedly out of it. This surrender of himself to a luminous instant of vision and the momentous effort to seize it in words lend Eberhart's poetry its remarkable power. Commitment, he so often tells us, should be to the truth, but we cannot from our limited and relative positions know truth fully. Therefore, the poet must commit himself totally to "vision felt as absolute when experienced."[5] The visions which come to Eberhart may be prompted by something seen or undergone in the routine of daily living that suddenly discloses an inner or hidden meaning. In **"New Hampshire, February,"** the poet discovers two wasps wedged into a crevice of his house and nearly dead with the cold. He removes and places them in a pan, then tries to revive them:

> Like God touching his finger to Adam
> I felt, and thought of Michaelangelo,
> For whenever I breathed on them,
> The slightest breath,
> They leaped, and preened as if to go.
>
> My breath controlled them always quite.
> More sensitive than electric sparks
> They came into life
> Or they withdrew to ice,
> While I watched, suspending remarks.
>
> Then one in a blind career got out,
> And fell to the kitchen floor. I
> Crushed him with my cold ski boot,
> By accident. The other
> Had not the wit to try or die.
>
> And so the other is still my pet.
> The moral of this is plain.
> But I will shirk it.
> You will not like it. And
> God does not live to explain.

Against this kind of despairing parable of existence which often forms in his mind out of reflections on the seeming ridiculousness of external events, happenings in the world, Eberhart sets other poems arising from meditation on abstract, religious or ethical themes. In spite of the furious skepticism with which the poem closes, its moral questioning is clear, substantial, and human; and in many other poems, such as **"Reality! Reality! What Is It?"** Eberhart indirectly furnishes answers to his own queries. These responses frequently border on religious vision, partake of it, or further probe spiritual torment. As **"Reality! Reality! What Is It?"** begins, the poet confesses his denials of Christ and states his own position as that of a man who always "considered the first truth tragedy." This opening announcement is deftly altered from stanza to stanza as the poem proceeds, and it finishes on an unexpected pitch of religious emotion:

> O Christ of Easter, impossible Man, Lord, and God
> I, cold geographer, map Your clear estate
> As one sentient, yet a prisoner, clashing Thy
> Cymbal in the gliding sound of my dying.

> Christ of Christ, what are you, beast or God,
> Must I deny that sweat upon that cross?
> Must I affirm what is not whatever I am,
> Christ, Christ! reality! reality! what is it?

The contradictory nature of the attitudes taken in the two poems, the first **"New Hampshire, February,"** from ***Burr Oaks*** (1947), the second **"Reality! Reality! What Is It?"** from ***Undercliff*** (1953), should not baffle the reader, for the vigor of Eberhart's poetry depends upon his fidelity to the inwardness of his moods, inspirations, and perceptions. But he rejects the idea of systematizing them. This practice may seem less inconsistent after we have read more than a few of the poems and have begun to notice a natural recurrence of certain interests and viewpoints.

In the course of his career, Eberhart's poetry and his conception of it have undergone but few changes, and these are modifications and temperings. The concluding poem of his recent collected edition still exhibits the essential tentativeness, the reluctance to name dogmatically the covert sources of his poetic vision:

> Elusive element, final mystery,
> The light beyond compare has been my visitant,
> Some sort of angel sometimes at my shoulder,
> A beckoning guide, elusive nevertheless . . .
>
> **("The Incomparable Light")**

We think at once of Rilke and his personally devised angelology, but how different is Eberhart's evasive statement—withdrawn as it is made—from the German poet's almost mystical assertions. However, Eberhart tends more and more consistently now to place the origins of his perceptions in a realm beyond mere physical appearance, a realm that is supernatural if indefinite:

> I dropped to depth,
> And then I leaped to height,
> But in between was the fearsome place.
>
> **("Birth and Death")**

His genuine visionary propensities do not cut Eberhart off from an abiding concern with the human estate in general. The earliest of his books, ***A Bravery of Earth*** (1930), is a long autobiographical narrative poem of which the author has wisely preserved only a few lovely lyrical passages like the beautiful "This fevers me, this sun on green." The poem, while it is highly personal, attempts to move past that limitation and takes as its theme youth and an awakening to the world, to love and sensual pleasure, which is followed by a fall from this ecstatic innocence into the disillusionment caused by the knowledge of death. The last section of the poem, and the best one, treats the young poet's travels as a steamer hand to China. Here Eberhart manages to convey his narrative with some objectivity and purpose, while the previous parts are swamped in undisciplined language and confused emotions. Even in a work of this length, Eberhart sustains a frenzied note, and the poem rushes from beginning to end at breakneck pace. It is, at best, a very immature poem, but it reveals at the start this poet's fascination with the dualities of experience: his desire to embrace equally the perpetual conflicts of reason with feeling, skepticism with belief, spirit with matter. His handling of language is from the start also characteristic, though he shows much greater inventiveness and dexterity in his second book. Edwin Muir once suggested that Eberhart wrote as if he had encountered words for the first time. Nothing could be more correct. Eberhart approaches language with naïveté and freshness; in his frequent disregard of common linguistic usage he employs words as things, hurling them at the reader's senses and consciousness in an ordered bombardment that forces new meanings from apparently intractable material, or that bursts with a sudden, unearthly light. Of course, this same spontaneous usage is responsible for the faults, the errors in taste which flaw too many poems that might, with some care, have been saved. This notion of composition demands of the poet that he catch an experience in the words in which it comes to him, not afterwards by reconstruction. Whatever the poem is, it is that experience, not an effort to duplicate it from memory. Eberhart links himself to D. H. Lawrence again through this practice, for Lawrence's interest was in snatching the fleeting moment from oblivion in its natural state. But Eberhart's poems read differently from Lawrence's, and in his finest early pieces this sense of the words constituting the experience creates startling results—sometimes resembling those of the metaphysical poets at their best:

> When golden flies upon my carcass come,
> Those pretty monsters, shining globules
> Like tautened oily suns, and congregate
> Fixing their several gems upon one core
> That shines a blossom then of burning gold,
> 'Tis as the sun's burning glass and diadem
> They work, at the first chance of rotten flesh,
> And, senseless little messengers of time,
> Some beauty keep even at the guts of things,
> Which is a fox caught, and I watch the flies.

Eberhart's language and syntax are the most immediately striking properties of his verse; and this is as it should be, for they reflect more than anything else his conception of poetry and, through that, his ideas of the nature of reality. Eberhart is always a philosophical poet.

In autobiographical poems such as ***A Bravery of Earth*** and later short poems like **"Orchard"** and **"The Soul Longs to Return whence It Came,"** as well as in the brief sketch of his life written for Stanley Kunitz's *Twentieth Century Authors,* the poet notes particular events which undoubtedly had a direct bearing on his

view of experience and on various aspects of his poetic temperament. Born into a family of means in Minnesota, Eberhart appears to have faced a period in his youth when tragedy struck wholesale at his family. His mother died of cancer, and his father, a stalwart and stoical man, suffered grave business reversals.[6] The poet has often returned to the subject of his mother's illness, her constancy in the grip of a mortal disease, and his ensuing grief, which was an introduction to the world of adult life and the loss of childhood. **"Orchard,"** which has this illness as its subject, begins with a family auto ride to visit a grove of fruit trees at dusk. The air is permeated with a fear and horror—of the known for the parents, of the unknown for the children—whose causes are only gradually extended to us:

> Lovely were the fruit trees in the evening.
> We sat in the automobile all five of us,
> Full of the silence of deep grieving,
> For tragedy stalked among the fruit trees.
>
> Strongest was the father, of solid years,
> Who set his jaw against the coming winter,
> Pure, hard, strong, and infinitely gentle
> For the worst that evil brings can only kill us.
>
> Most glorious was the mother, beautiful
> Who in the middle course of life was stalked
> by the stark shape of malignant disease,
> And her face was holy white like all desire.
>
> And we three, in our benumbing youngness,
> Half afraid to guess at the danger there,
> Looked in stillness at the glowing fruit trees,
> While tumultuous passions raged in the air.

Eberhart achieves here a curious ambivalence in his attitude, for the occasion is witnessed half with the innocent eye of a child, half with the wisdom acquired of living—the sort of combination we might associate with Blake's earlier poems. The second half of the poem focuses on the strength of the father, the mother's capacity for love, and "the first light / Of brutal recognition" the three children receive. At the conclusion, the entire orchard has been transformed into a scene of turbulent and opposing passions. The people themselves are nearly obscured, as ships and men are in a Turner painting of a storm at sea; forces are unleashed in what has now become almost an abstract realm of pure spirit:

> And in the evening, among the warm fruit trees
> All of life and all of death were there,
> Of pain unto death, of struggle to endure,
> And the strong right of human love was there.

One could criticize these last lines for loosening their hold on tangible reality, yet the passage demonstrates Eberhart's moral impulse and his desire to connect the tragic emotional situation of the family with universal conditions of suffering and of virtue. To give it a nearly abstract dimension is one way of presenting it as a manifestation of a much larger struggle.

A sensitivity to death, to its eruption in the midst of a full existence, haunts Eberhart's poetry and stems, at least partially, from this bitter childhood circumstance. We never find in the poems a fear of death as such. Sometimes death exerts a spell over the poet's imagination; sometimes it seems merely an intrusion on life or a means of humiliation for man. In some of the visionary poems, Eberhart attempts to project himself beyond the boundaries of life, with differing effects. He has adjusted to the idea of death without succumbing to the sort of obsession with extinction that fills the atmosphere of, say, Dylan Thomas's poetry.

Along with the realization of suffering and death—and the quiet heroism with which they may be countered—Eberhart made acquaintance with the facts of time, change, and determinacy. The contrary attitudes so noticeable from poem to poem, especially in his earlier writings, illustrate this poet's basic contention that our experience of reality is an experience of opposites, and of them is life composed. As a poet, Eberhart sees his task as one of exploring, through seizures of intuition and gifts of inspiration, his own nature and that of the world together. Thus, in what amounts to a search for the truth of all existence, the poet cannot be, he argues, "a dogmatist," he needs rather to be "a relativist."[7] Knowledge and experience are fragmentary; we have not "perfect understanding"[8] of our condition. Poetry—in particular, one gathers, if it comes from a stroke of spiritual insight—is a gesture toward understanding, an advance toward the unity and perfection which we believe is ours by some right, but which we still do not know:

> The motive for writing is to make up for some sense of lack in oneself, an obscure and earthly realization that must be old as man. This includes, of course, the excess of energy common to the artist, his direct and violent perception. Divisive man can know unity only at death (or so he can speculate), and he cannot know what kind of unity that is. He lives in continuous struggle with his imperfection and the imperfection of life. If one were only conscious of harmony, there would be no need to write.[9]

Whatever indecisiveness remains in Eberhart's mind, his thinking and writing, as Michael Roberts said in the preface to ***Reading the Spirit,*** take root in the main ideas of the Christian tradition. An excerpt from a letter on poetry clearly points up the author's sense of original sin—or its results—the broken experience of life which poetry tries to reassemble. "Christ is the poem absolute," he writes, and is thus "impossible to overhaul," for He embodies, a beauty, harmony, and ordered love beyond man's ordinary reach.[10] Poems will at least open such possibilities of love and order to human contemplation, though as poems they cannot in themselves provide those virtues lacking in our lives.

Some critics have indicated a resemblance to Wallace Stevens in certain of Eberhart's more recent poems.

Undoubtedly the younger poet has felt the impact of Stevens' writing as one of the greatest influences in contemporary American poetry, but Eberhart never shows any tendency to subscribe to Stevens' theory of the imagination as a cosmology or theology. He does not share Stevens' desire to deify that human faculty. Many of Eberhart's poems register in ecstatic fashion the mind's lyrical impulse raised to feverish heights by the imperfection of things, and by the destructive element at work in the reality we do know. Stevens' poetry elaborates a system of aesthetics to change the world; Eberhart accepts reality as he finds it, or as it is given to him, with all its contradictions:

> It is a terrible thrall to be alone,
> With all joy there, and destroying fate
> Slicing the flesh, hot fangs on the bone;
> The intense quality of desire
> Blasphemes, and is at fault to the core.
> Silence in bitterness is the hardest thing;
> But nobler to ask the fire to burn more,
> If the mind can endure, and can sing.
> Even beyond joy and despair are spun
> Unutterable remoteness in the air,
> Intolerable nearness in the sun,
> And the separateness of each man in his lair.
>
> **("Necessity")**

The occurrence caught here, as so often elsewhere in Eberhart's poetry, is a break through the confinements of ordinary perception made available to the poet by intuition or inspiration. The final worth of these luminous moments—"seer-states,"[11] as Eberhart calls them—consists in the light they shower on the extremities of human life, because they allow the one who is visited by them to surpass the enervating conflicts and paradoxes of his normal situation as a man and to touch a spiritual region outside their range. Even though the attitudes of different poems may clash, each is true to the insight which made it possible. The poet cannot, of course, remain in this exalted state, since he has not the capacity to withstand its pressures. T. S. Eliot gave us one of the best reminders in "Burnt Norton" that the timeless experience must be followed by a return to the temporal:

> Yet the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
> Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
> Which flesh cannot endure.[12]

Eberhart is much less orthodox in his view of this than Eliot, though the idea applies to both poets. The late Joseph Warren Beach said of him that he was "mystic" but never strict in any doctrinal adherence,[13] and this summary appears, with slight reservations, to be accurate. So we find Eberhart writing, "A poet has to be two persons, at least two. He has to have superior energies, enough for the world as it is, in which he does not believe, and an abundance for the world of becoming, which he makes real."

Poetry, then, is frequently for Eberhart an overthrow of things as they are—not in order to change them, but to get to things as they *really* are. However, we need to modify Professor Beach's classification here. It would be a misinterpretation of Eberhart's work to think of him as a genuine mystic, and he makes no pretensions of the sort. A mystic, I take it, is one who professes close apprehension of the Divine, but this is surely not the case with Eberhart. His poetry grows out of vision and lightning flashes of profound spiritual insight; yet these do not resolve his uncertainties in the manner in which direct mystical experiences altered completely the lives of St. Paul and St. John the Evangelist, or St. John of the Cross.

While he is a visionary poet, as I shall prefer to call him, Eberhart never denies the substantiality of the world and the weight of its actual presence. If he is most times a visionary, he is almost always a strong moralist, too. He continues to insist upon our finitude, our fallibility and blindness as central to the existence we know. As a religious poet—and we cannot really avoid calling him that, though he is not a devotional one—he attacks the bounds of our knowledge, not in the hope of soaring completely free of the world, rather to report to men his discoveries. With his French contemporary, René Char, Eberhart views the poet as "the source of a being that projects and a being that preserves" ("Le poète est la genèse d'un être qui projette et un être qui retient"). His poem **"The Goal of Intellectual Man"** clarifies this visionary aspect of poetry forcefully and compassionately.

> The goal of intellectual man
> Striving to do what he can
> To bring down out of uncreated light
> Illumination to our night
>
> Is not possession of the fire
> Annihilation of his own desire
> To the source a secret soaring
> And all his self outpouring
>
> Nor is it an imageless place
> Wherein there is no human face
> Nor laws, nor hierarchies, nor dooms
> And only the cold weight of the tomb
>
> But it is human love, love
> Concrete, specific, in a natural move
> Gathering goodness, it is free
> In the blood as in the mind's harmony,
>
> It is love discoverable here
> Difficult, dangerous, pure, clear,
> The truth of the positive hour
> Composing all of human power.

This love becomes the motive strength informing most of Eberhart's poetry; and poetry, in its turn, which is "not less than an attempt to move the world, to order