

Chapter for
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A World of Exception:
Exploring the thought of Loren Eiseley

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In a secular world what does it mean to declare for the sacred? For mystery, awe and wonder? Is it a modernist blasphemy implicating us in the *God Delusion* that Richard Dawkins¹ decries? Tying us to the premodern world of superstition and fear? On the other hand, it could simply be an expression of the natural human impulse to posit the permanent as the counterpoint to our own finitude? Certainly it implicates us in those common sets of dialectical clichés that drive culture and identity. This kind of dialectic makes it appear as if we humans have much choice over the great issues that frame our existence. So the binaries of culture such as sacred and profane, man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, heaven and hell, natural and unnatural create a sense of agency which is instantly paralyzed by the magnitude of the cliché itself. Rather than more modestly seeing choice as a tool for navigating the issue of how do I live and die well, we are asked to choose (as if in choosing it makes any difference at all) between the great polarities of culture. In this I am reminded of Vivekananda's stinging comment:

The watchword of all wellbeing, of all moral good is not 'I' but 'thou'. Who cares whether there is a heaven or a hell, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world and it is full

of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt.²

Certainly death is a cliché, an apostrophe in life that reminds us to be faithful to today. It is a goad to action both in the field of existential expression and in the fields of scientific and creative enquiry. Yet, as Julia Kristeva points out, the clichés keep on flowing through our cultural membrane and bolstering the dialectical positions of profane and sacred protagonists:

The evolution of the clichés that we have experienced until now continues to evolve, both the sacred side and the blasphemous one, for which the exact forms have yet to be determined.³

Death, being something both sacred and profane, is a magnet for clichés and certainly as it morphs through the statistical maze that is the labyrinth of the Western bureaucratic mind we find it dancing a weird dance. Jacques Derrida thus observed, “You know, of course, that one does not count the dead in the same way from one corner of the globe to the other”⁴. In fact counting goes out the window in the shadow of Stalin’s comment that “One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic.” A cliché is also a kind of statistic, it distances and shelters us from some naked experience of vulnerability. And we need sheltering. The moment the first human discovered death as an event horizon was the moment when culture was born, because in that moment of raw awareness we began searching for meaning: For a “why?” to our own finitude.

Yet something so legion and so unique does weave its own kind of poetry. It reminds us, as the poet Wendell Berry acknowledges, that “we are what we have lost”⁵. For Loren Eiseley this link between loss and identity was the source of the pathos he felt and so soulfully expressed in the face of

Modernity. It is the source of what he describes as the 'penumbral rainbow' that clothes us all in our humanness. It is the other side to our ephemeral selves: "This rainbow, which exists in all heads and dies with none, is the essential part of man. Through it he becomes what we call human, and not otherwise. Man is not a creature to be contained in a solitary skull..."⁶.

This chapter proposes to explore this aporia – the tension between the finitude of personal existence and the poetic revelation that universalizes the human condition and builds on a longing for infinity. The back drop to this story is Eiseley's concern that the future will witness the extinction of both the human race and life on the planet. It is not that he is concerned so much that an errant star such as Eta Carinae (only 7500 light years from us and 'decidedly unstable'⁷) might explode and wipe the planet out; rather it is human folly itself that broods permanently in his peripheral vision: "The future, formidable as a thunder cloud, is still inchoate and unfixed upon the horizon".⁸ This is both embodied in that rhetorical cliché the 'bomb'; yet it is also a physical morbid evolution that he seeks simultaneously to grasp and escape with considerable rye ambivalence: "The beginning and the end are dying in unison and the one is braver than the other"⁹.

An Historical Turning Point

Carlo Ginzburg captures this possibility and its historical relevance to both the individual and society:

The possibility that the human race may be destroyed, a possibility that in itself constitutes a decisive historical turning point, has exerted and will exert its influence respectively on the lives of every future generation and on the fragments of memory of every generation that passes or has

passed : and this includes those of whom Aristotle wrote, ‘ten thousand years in the past or the future.’ At the same time, the sphere of what Aristotle called ‘common law’ seems to have become much broader. But to express compassion for those distant fellow humans would be, I suspect, an act of mere rhetoric. Our capacity to pollute and destroy the present, the past, and the future is incomparably greater than our feeble moral imagination.¹⁰

Ginzburg identifies the general historical condition that establishes a boundary, not unlike death itself in its uniqueness, that challenges each generation with that common law, that order of existence which reflects upon, folds in on, the unique embedded in the general. This is what Walter Benjamin alludes to constantly in his thought as Theodor Adorn notes. For him Benjamin’s explorations are:

...not directed to the ahistorical at all, but rather to what is temporarily determined and irreversible ... Benjamin’s images are not linked with nature as moments of a self-identical ontology but rather in the name of death, of transience as the supreme category of natural existence, the category toward which Benjamin’s thought advances. What is eternal in them is only the transient.¹¹

Eiseley similarly distinguishes between the natural process of death, its ‘self-identical ontology’, and its cultural construction, not in the nuanced way that Benjamin does but in the allegorical manner of the poet story teller who holds the general and the unique simultaneously in the palm of his hand. Yet, like Benjamin his reference point is in the multiplicity of the human moment that “unconsciously resents continuity and causality; [humanity] is *event-driven*.”¹²

In this context the sacred becomes a legitimate response to the bounded and unique nature of death as a category. It is an event-driven response to the extreme isolation of a generalized condition and what Eiseley describes as “the wound of time”¹³. He uses this wound to adopt a somewhat paradoxical approach to human finitude. Generalizing from the phenomena he plays the ‘anticipatory man’ as witness to a possible future mass death. Much of his work can thus be read as a mourning for the not yet dead.

Mourning the Future?

Generally, the relationship we have with the Other can be seen to embody the awareness that one of those in the relationship will predecease the other. There is always, implicit in the connection with another human being, the unwritten awareness that one will out live the other and perform the public and private rights of mourning. In Eiseley’s thinking this relationship, across time, as Ginzburg, via Aristotle acknowledges, is inverted and he mourns with poetic clarity for the human death-to-come. Yet, is this logically coherent? Following the Zen koan that asks, what is the sound of one hand clapping? Is Eiseley, through the power of a prophetic imagination, able to bear witness, and thus mourn, in anticipation, the end of humanity or life? We must recognize that the fertility of Eiseley’s dark dreams are a source of much of his bearing witness for humanity, as he states: “I dream, and because I dream, I severally condemn, fear, and salute the future”¹⁴.

Or, when that end ultimately arrives, will the concept of bearing witness be meaningless? Just as the existential conundrum of the Zen koan confronts us, so does the existential relationship of witnessing that which lies beyond any witnessing (unless the Godhead witnesses) calls us to account as mourners *in absentia*.

In fact, can we mourn for the end of a generalized condition? Does the work of mourning imply the specific? The personal connection that generates the act? Perhaps not. It is possible for us to mourn, to feel the bitterness of the loss that occurred in the mass genocides of the twentieth century. Yet is this work of mourning, a retrospective mourning, the same as the prospective mourning that resonates though out much of Eiseley's opus?

Death as Entertainment

Eiseley does have good company though. There are others who have engaged in forms of prospective witnessing and ironic mourning. Socrates for instance engaged a celebratory and ironic mourning with family and friends, basically holding his own wake, before suiciding¹⁵; similarly, John Cleese recently gave his own ironic eulogy¹⁶. Death, and our witnessing of it, therefore can often be a form of entertainment - certainly the reportage of it has become so. Plato may have dramatized Socrates final moments, and the dramatic intensity cannot be denied, but the image of death captured on film raises death to an art form that has previously eluded our culture. Susan Sontag only recently observed, "To catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras can do..."¹⁷. The relationship caught in such images is mysterious, something in our humanity is both challenged and affirmed. Commenting on the image of a 1968 street execution in Vietnam, Sontag concludes:

As for the viewer, this viewer, even many years after the picture was taken...well, one can gaze at these faces for a long time and not come to the end of the mystery, and the indecency, of such co-spectatorship.¹⁸

Judith Butler¹⁹, in her meditation on the effect of the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers on the American psyche, also points to this connection with the other through image. For her the entertainment value is overwhelmed by the moral dimension of the image of the other. Yet, there is no doubt that for many there was something horrifyingly fascinating about the repeated running of the images of the towers tottering and people leaping to their deaths. One of my students told me his grand father had described the coverage as 'Great TV'. To comprehend such a statement requires an appreciation of the vast distance that is the other face of the immediacy – and indecency – of the image. When human vulnerability is presented graphically through the medium of television it can be sentimentalized, romanticized, cauterized, even sanitized – yet it is always dramatized.

The mythic nature of our confrontation with something beyond simulacra²⁰ hinges on our ability, via a sensed universal condition of vulnerability, to identify with the image. Yet that identification takes many routes and is openly manipulated by the mass media as a form of political and aesthetic craft. So how we respond to the image of death is constructed according to the context. Derrida, thus observed that there was a formulaic, mantric, quality to the intonation of the phrase 9/11 in the weeks following the horror of the attack²¹. The purpose of this repetition is in part to comprehend the incomprehensible. The repetition of the images of the planes flying into the towers, the people leaping to their deaths, the cloud of dust as the buildings imploded, all follow this line of representing the incomprehensible. Trying to meet in that moment the evil that humans are capable of, trying also to objectify and distance ourselves from it. When the wound is successfully cauterized then the image becomes 'Great TV'. Yet at that moment the real terror emerges as we have ceased to identify with the wound and are capable of its repetition.

Butler captures this paradox, and its implications, when she observes:

We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our own inhumanity²².

Forgetfulness and Memory

When death is represented in the face of the Other we are confronted with the tension that forever exists between the micro and the macro, between representation and the represented. Eiseley moves between these frames in his own rhetoric, inviting the reader in to an intimate world of personal narrative and then shifting focus and drawing grand conclusions. The weaving of personal history with broader cultural history is characteristic of Eiseley's approach to cultural studies. One concern central to his critique of modernity is forgetfulness and memory. Thus for Eiseley to collectively forget history is to invite a death of the mind and evoke a dark future.

Those individuals who persist in pursuing the mind-destroying drug of constant action have not alone confined themselves to an increasingly chaotic present – they are also, by the deliberate abandonment of their past, destroying the conceptual tools and values that are the means of introducing the rational into the oncoming future.²³

There is a problem here of course, in that the future we face is not the stable future of a steady state world. Knowing

the past will not necessarily provide the ready map Eiseley feels we need to 'rationally' negotiate a future in which the quality of issues facing the human species is substantially different. Thus we might ask how will the knowledge of the past help us deal with the emergent future which contains the development of transhumanity, cyborgs, and life extension processes that promise vastly lengthened lives? Furthermore, how will such knowledge help humanity deal with issues relating to civilizational engagement and conflict, as the global theatre of human action shrinks and insists upon dialogue, negotiation and compromise as the preface to the emergence of a diverse, yet coherent global human civilization? For Eiseley, with his intimate internal connection with the past he is inclined to see the impoverished present of a suddenly affluent and self obsessed 'mass' America as the litmus for future possibilities, even though he acknowledges the tension between technological razzle-dazzle and the human "hunger for psychological composure and peace"²⁴.

Myth

Eiseley's position in this process is a prophet of the human *mythos*. His work is all about the recovery of the memory of who we are. Memory, shimmers on his pages in anecdote, metaphor and myth. Thus he notes, "Men have long memories when the memories are clothed in myth"²⁵. He captures the sense of the newness of the human predicament by anchoring it in the nature of the human psyche, a future awaits, but what is it? What does it hold? "We have brought with us out of the forest darkness a new unprophesiable world – a latent, lurking universe within our heads"²⁶.

It is this unprophesiable world that holds both the key to the future as well as its peril. Eiseley mourns our loss of innocence. Yet, he does not trust humanity to overcome its

own finitude. So his diagnosis is plaintive, rich with the ecstatic quality of an epic dirge, yet openly askance in the face of a death of identity which validated the human as a member of a conscious community of adventurers. The question of inheritance is heavy in Eiseley, for he cannot see, as Socrates may have seen, a possible recipient of the human legacy. For, if we follow Glen Most's²⁷ argument that by offering a cock to Asclepius Socrates, the product of an oral tradition, was anointing Plato, the producer of a written tradition, as his successor, we can find no such disciple for Eiseley, who would have rejected such an idea in any case. Eiseley writes as one at the end of a lineage. Socrates however, has an heir who at the time of his death had been ill, but who was recovering. The relationship between Socrates and Plato is thus formalized and both a given a sense of continuity and purpose, as Most points out:

Socrates' philosophy will not be lost together with Socrates, but can be entrusted to a disciple worthy of it; the death of the oral philosopher founds Plato's written philosophy. And on the other hand, the rescue of the group may correspond to a deeper rescue of Plato himself. For on this view his recovery enjoins upon him responsibilities, to Socrates and to his philosophy, which he had not had before. Before this illness he had been just a disciple: now Socrates has legitimated him as his heir.²⁸

Heroic Isolation

Yet there is no such recognition for Eiseley who stands isolated and alone, faced with a sense that something has come to an end and yet unable to really grasp at what, beyond consumerism and spiritual alienation, might represent the future. Thus he observes:

‘There is no loneliness,’ once maintained the Egyptologist John Wilson, ‘like the loneliness of a mighty place fallen out of its proper service to man.’ Perhaps the same loneliness inevitably haunts modern man himself, that restless and vacant eyed wanderer through the streets of cities, that man of ruinous countenance from whom the gods have hidden themselves.²⁹

To adopt Eiseley’s mythic stance, he appears like Odysseus standing at the mouth of the underworld³⁰. He is a voice for the Other – the future-past of humanity – that has been abandoned in the rush for control over the material world. Yet I feel he underestimated the forces involved in this great struggle to redefine both meaning and relationship. Richard Slaughter with the present author³¹ discuss this issue and the role prophets like Eiseley play when looking at the world’s problems. As an early commentator on breakdown in the coherence of long established systems, Eiseley is unable to see beyond them. Yet, a futures approach is inherently hopeful. One can live either as an optimist or a pessimist. The Israeli politician Shimon Peres made this point in a recent interview:

An optimist and a pessimist die the same way; they only live differently. I prefer to live as an optimist.
³²

Eiseley, the pessimist, was sounding an early warning call and can be seen as a prophet of the fall who saves the future by seeing its end. Slaughter with Bussey put it this way:

We can ... focus on the underlying breakdowns of meaning that have occurred (and are occurring) within all cultures affected by industrialized values and assumptions. Once again, focusing on ‘the

breakdown' could be misconstrued if it were taken to be merely an attack on existing structures. However this is not the case. It is a necessary stage of diagnosis. *Knowing what has gone wrong constitutes an important step in putting things right.*³³

This perspective takes the future – its possible trajectories and implications – as a principle for present action. The prophet and the statistician both have a place in this world, as do the policy makers, the politicians and the citizen. The non-human dimensions of the gaian-system also have a voice as weather patterns, extinction rates and seductive sunsets. In this context Eiseley laments the death of a system, he points to the renewal of a sense of responsibility that calls us to action. Death, as was noted above, forges relational ties. If a system has died, it too will be mourned by some while others turn with resolve to the development of a new order. In this context death becomes an invitation to action. The present at such times is lived as a deficit that awaits something – like the groom in a Persian *ghazal* awaiting the coming of the bride.

In this sense Eiseley is representative of that point of emergent ecological consciousness Andrew Jamison³⁴ describes as 'the period of awakening'. This period he sees as the first in a series of phases that describe the emergence of environmental consciousness as a mass social perspective. What is essential to this phase is the recognition of absence – humanity is faced with a new context for which there are no maps to help negotiate the alien terrain. Ethics are necessary for any map to function and Jamison quotes environmentalist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) in the 1940s calling for such an ethic to help humanity deal with the land and all that live on it.

A New Ethic, a New Humanism

Part of this ethic lies on an expansion of human literacy to reclaim some of that which we have, according to Eiseley, lost in our moving from the natural to the cultural realms of existence. He maps this literacy in the essay *The Golden Alphabet* in which ‘man’ (sic) the ‘oracular animal’ reads the environment and the ‘mighty alphabet of the universe’ in order to invoke and navigate the future³⁵. He finds in the thinking of the axial thinkers, great souls such as Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed, the ethical and poetic thinking to reintegrate that which has been lost into the new paradigm that threatens, in the absence of a coherent ethical system, to overwhelm us. When the ethical imperatives of the natural meet those of the cultural a possible third world emerges that frames the possibility of a new humanism. This world is one in which ‘man’:

... must now incorporate from the wisdom of the axial thinkers an ethic not alone directed toward his fellows, but extended to the living world around him. He must make, by way of his cultural world, an actual conscious re-entry into the sunflower forest he had thought merely to exploit or abandon. He must do this in order to survive. If he succeeds he will, perhaps, have created a third world which combines elements of the original two and which should bring closer the responsibilities and nobleness of character envisioned by the axial thinkers who may be acclaimed as the creators, if not of man, then of his soul³⁶.

A similar approach to ethical sustainability is to be found in abundance today and has been summarized in a recent work that this author co-edited with Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojevic³⁷. Here this neohumanist (‘neo’ is Greek for ‘new’) approach is explored as a foundation for pedagogical futures and is described as a form of enacted, anticipatory

spiritual holism: essentially an ethical approach to human systems. In the thirty years since the death of Eiseley the fulcrum of change has released an immense array of engagements with the issues that lie at the heart of Eiseley's concerns yet the issues are persistent and progress seems painfully slow.

This new humanism's source of inspiration maps the encounter between civilizations³⁸ that has enriched both the ethical thinking of the current neohumanist mood, but also its aesthetic and mythic forms. The hybridity of the term 'neohumanism' itself illustrates this process. It has a Greek prefix linked to a Latin root and was coined by the Indian Tantric philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1921-1990). It draws on both critical and poststructural insights into reality while retaining its normative commitment to the social, economic and spiritual growth of all that is on the planet and in the universe.

A Layered Reality

The tension implied here between western critical rationality and the eastern synthetic rationality is maintained by negotiating reality as a layered field in which order morphs as we recognize context. This awareness is the source of the integrative rationality Eiseley posits as a tool for engaging the future³⁹. For him, this was anchored in the past, in memory and myth and the ethical structures of the axial thinkers, yet it is also called for by new encounters and the emergent wisdom this evokes.

This is a tension involved in the cultural temperaments of two distinctive ways of seeing the world. William Irwin Thompson⁴⁰ describes it in mythic terms as a shift between *thymos* to *psyche*, from group/collective to individual and sees it reflected in the generalized distinction between east and west, the female and the male (those dialectical clichés

again). In this we see various domains of human action privileged. When *thymos* is dominant the collective soul is seen moving between the shades of the underworld and conversing with animals and magicians; when *psyche* is dominant then the individual is found observing, as Odysseus observed the underworld, and choosing as Aeneas did between the love of Dido and the duty of responsibility. This template effectively reflects Eiseley's own thinking on the collective natural world and the differentiated cultural world.

In the latter magic is replaced by science yet as Eiseley warns:

For the man whom no magic will charm may, in the end, find himself, by means of a darker sorcery, upon a shore as desolate as that which Odysseus narrowly escaped in passing the Isle of the Sirens.
41

It is when this magic is evoked and a new synthetic approach begins to emerge that the darkness that overwhelms Eiseley's prophetic imaginings becomes less oppressive and more evocative. This question of magic also raises the question of causality. For the web of relationships that is layered into an holistic, neohumanist approach allows for causal links to emerge that reflect the context and consciousnesses of the participants in the drama of social life.

Causal Layering

This neohumanist approach, which Eiseley points to as creating the possible entry to a third world in which the natural and the cultural coexist and mutually co-create a context of being that allows for sustainable human action, is modeled in Inayatullah's⁴² process of epistemic mapping

called Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). In this process reality is seen as falling into four relatively coherent layers which Inayatullah calls litany, the systemic, the paradigmatic and the mythic. Each layer understands and enacts causality differently. We inhabit all layers but tend, unconsciously, to move between them. Context here is everything.

So, in the case of the future and Eiseley's dark forebodings it could be argued that when he functions at the level of litany, when he looks at the discrete and incoherent examples of decline, anarchy, and senseless destruction that human beings engage in on a daily basis, he is bound to draw the darkest of conclusions, there is no escape from the mindless motion of human activity. As a student of culture he is also aware of the relative inability of institutions and human systems to effect deep change – they reflect a world view and simultaneously maintain it. Yet they are unaware that their world view is both contingent and malleable, the present is reality and a given. Eiseley sees the illogic that drives much systemic and institutional thinking as another higher order expression of a toxic society. There is little to be hoped for there. At the level of paradigm or world view Eiseley sees western scientific culture gripped by an inflexible materialism which divides it from the organic and the natural. Magic and myth has been reduced to experiments and theories, while control has been substituted for awe. Human beings are locked in the rigor of a heartless paradigm from which the only escape is death of both the individual and collective. Finally, when thinking mythically Eiseley is deeply poetic. His driving myth is best caught at the end of his book on Francis Bacon. In the last pages Eiseley describes being lost in the middle of a storm in the American Midwest. As the rain pelts down he hears the wheels of a large hayrick on a wooden bridge. When he tries to wave the wagon down a bolt of lightning reveals the disfigured face of the driver:

In that brief, momentary glimpse within the heart of the lightning, haloed, in fact, by its wet shine, I had seen a human face of so incredible a nature as still to amaze and mystify me as to its origin. It was – by some fantastic biological exaggeration – two faces welded vertically together along the midline, like the riveted iron toys of my childhood. One side was lumpish with swollen and malign excrescences; the other shone in the blue light, pale, ethereal, and remote – a face marked by suffering, yet serene and alien to that visage with which it shared this dreadful mortal frame.⁴³

In this countenance, Eiseley sees the human predicament. One in which the angelic and the lost is forever at war; forever condemned to be partial and incomplete. Thus he concludes:

But that I saw the double face of mankind in that instant of vision I can no longer doubt. I saw man – all of us – galloping through a torrential landscape, diseased and fungoid, with that pale half-visage of nobility and despair dwarfed but serene upon a twofold countenance.⁴⁴

In this last dark imagining Eiseley holds both the mythic and the phatic as two points of a compass, in that he sees the faces as suspended dualities, representing yet another dialectical cliché – an unsolvable problematic caught forever like Tantalus pushing the rock up the hill in Tartarus. ‘What endless, pointless suffering!’, he seems to be saying. Yet if he played the image out, explored the myth he might have found richer more fecund readings. Could not the face be that of a Janus god? One who guards the entrance to a deeper reality of poetic dwelling, to use Heidegger’s rich phrase? In choosing the dramatic, clichéd reading he over looks the

invitation such an image represents. Yet, perhaps coherence is not what he is searching for.

Shamanic Distance

As with his admired Francis Bacon, Eiseley deliberately positions himself at a distance from coherent meaning. Death for him invites the question: who am I? It is a shamanic position that guarantees the open eyes of a Cassandra, one for whom one's visions will ever be denied, yet for whom the visions are also to be fulfilled. Certainly the world of Eiseley's childhood is dead. Space has collapsed as has time, yet the human condition remains to contest the ultimate conclusion that life is meaningless. In the kaleidoscope of change the one constant is the human. Yet, and here is the paradox, the human as Eiseley, in all his existential solitude cannot read the present and sees in the stars of the future only deeper alienation, deeper isolation. At this point Eiseley cries for his mother – the woman who could not hear him (for she was stone deaf) – and bereft he turns to the earth, his adoptive mother, and projects his wound, like the Fisher King, onto his 'kingdom'. The wound that he explores repeatedly in all his writings is this: the personal-universal disjunction. He is most at home when in solitary communion with nature, yet at this time he is lonely; yet when he is wrapped in the mad movement of the world, he is lost.

Max Loreau, in a letter written around the time Eiseley was working on *The Man Who Saw Through Time*, notes of this paradoxical condition:

In the end it is a matter of returning to animal life without renouncing thought, of reintroducing phosphorescent life into thought: it is difficult not to slip at one point or another. And all it takes is for one to indulge in these practices in solitude – every

theatrical dimension being suspended – and very quickly one no longer understands the others. The task is to be able to keep company with both madness and the others. And madness is so tempting for us who have learnt only to keep company with others ... So tempting and so frightening.⁴⁵

In this it is easy to see Eiseley: His failure to understand the others *in extremis*, casts him adrift in his own madness. Yet he knows his wound, he sees with it, hides it from those whom he teaches, like a treasure hidden from Scrooge. His wound is his own death, his own existential extinction and he mourns for himself and his universal other. He senses the ‘phosphorescent life’ that Loreau alludes to. It is what he feels lies in potential before a benighted humanity, yet to reach it he must contemplate the loss of everything. For life, an integrated being, is only possible when death has died. His shamanic soul recognizes that only at that point when the impossible, the rational extinction of rationality, is embraced that the death of death will occur. The shamanic spirit of Tantra speaks regularly of this aporia as the opening that announces liberation, not from the politics of the ego-mind but from the discourse of coherence.

This is the Tantra of light and dark, of paradox and of the multi-causality that lies beyond causality. This is, in short, the shaman’s land. One in which Eiseley is simultaneously at home and lost. This is the true state of exception explored by Giorgio Agamben⁴⁶, one in which the ultimate sovereignty passes from the individual, to the collective, to a collective singularity and thence to an abstract causality; The shamanic spirit when aligned with this abstract ‘outer’ exception witnesses but remains silent. The beauty of CLA is that causality is seen as fluid and contextual, and that ultimate cause is placed outside the body politic and yet ownership of a relative causal possibility is available to all. Eiseley plays

hopscotch with such causal positioning and moves at times between all four layers. In all positions he is bounded by a romantic temperament which invites the madness that lies at the feet of all true romantic witnesses. Take Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* as a visual metaphor for this position. Madness and awe mixed with a sense of something for ever out of reach; perhaps broken? Or wounded? Certainly dual and contested. In Tantra this is seen as the irony that we need this body to escape this body; we are in the world to transform it and ourselves, as Vivekananda reminds us. Not by hand, as modernity would have us believe, but through an inner realignment that Eiseley is a prophet of.

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore captures this tension beautifully when he sings in his *Gitanjali*: "I dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless."⁴⁷

The Tantric philosopher Sarkar puts it much more pragmatically but no less profoundly:

Therefore we arrive at the paradox that *Mukti* (i.e. freedom from the bondage of *maya*) can be achieved not by a fight against *maya*, but rather through its help.⁴⁸

The Prison of the Word

By considering the 'death of death', not in the superficial sense of life extension, but in its mythic formulation as a witnessing for the Other – both past and future – who is outcaste beyond the civil order of Eiseley's second world of culture, we meet his Janus faced presence in ourselves. Such a positioning implies the timeless world of the wolf, to whom Eiseley dedicates his book *The Unexpected Universe*. This is the world that, to use yet another dialectical cliché, is

both transcendent and immanent, bounded by the eternal struggle between chaos and order. It is the world of Tantra and all indigenous apprehension. Thus, the sacred walks with the profane and time is timeless. The Iroquois teacher Paula Underwood, who wrote the beautiful text *Who Speaks for Wolf?*, makes this point:

In Native American traditions, in general, time is not even a factor. It is not even considered a real thing, but something invented by man to torment himself. Instead, in my tradition, the focus is on making very efficient use of energy. So you watch, you wait, until things seem to be falling together ... and there is where you put your major effort. There is where you apply your own skills and purposes. In that way, you make maximum use of who you are in the context of what exists around you.⁴⁹

In this sense to 'apply your own skills and purposes' is to perform one's *dharma*, the Tantric concept for a thing's essential characteristic. At the individual level, in Tantric ontology, this means to attempt to live an ethical life that benefits the collective while nurturing the spiritual core of one's being. At the collective level it is usually described in Tantric texts as the human desire for expansion: at the physical level this means movement, at the metaphysical level this means a mythic quest. All levels bring with them new challenges. Hence at the physical level movement comes to mean colonization and consumerism; at the metaphysical level we can meet fundamentalism and hegemony. One such challenge in this quest Eiseley identifies as language itself.

No matter how far-ranging some of the mental probes that man has philosophically devised, by his own created nature he is forced to hold the specious and emerging present and transform it into words.

The words are startling in their immediate effectiveness, but at the same time they are always finally imprisoning because man has constituted himself as a prison keeper. He does so out of no conscious intention, but because for immediate purposes he has created an unnatural world of his own, which he calls the cultural world, and in which he feels at home.⁵⁰

For Eiseley, human *dharma* seems caught in its own web of self-actualization. As humanity found words to express the dynamism of self-awareness, a dynamism anchored in the awareness of our own finitude, we simultaneously became prisoners of our words. And not just prisoners, prison keepers too!

Two Poets

Thomas Berry sees this tension in more enabling terms:

Inherent in the human situation is the problem of keeping our cultural expression integrally related to our genetic endowment. Through our genetic endowment we maintain our intimate presence to the functioning of the earth community and to the emergent process of the universe itself. This problem of properly relating cultural coding to the imperatives of our genetic coding is the central, the immediate problem, a problem that does not exist, or exists in a minimal degree, with other species.⁵¹

For Berry the challenge is to find a way forward – an evolutionary path – that balances both codes, the genetic and the cultural, and allows the universe to celebrate its being in our, and therefore its, self-awareness.⁵² This integral awareness is less clearly defined in Eiseley's work. Berry acts as a poet of the cosmos, his concern is to provide a map

to the future; Eiseley on the other hand is a poet of the microcosmos, his concern is to describe human frailty and natural particularity. For him all maps are traps.

Keeping the universe in the background his writings focus on the universal in the particular, thus he whispers in his essay 'The Star Thrower':

But I *do* love the world...I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangling surf, the bird, singing, who flies and falls and is not seen again... I love the lost ones, the failures of the world.⁵³

To Eiseley it is no coincidence that the breaking of the physical atom, which has released such deadly power, occurred in the century which saw the breaking of the social 'atom' of the individual. This rise of individualism, the individual as free radical, has released immense psycho-physical energy in the form of democratic-capitalism. The city walls of the ancient world have fallen and Eiseley, the man-wolf, prowls the streets, an outcaste both to the world of culture and to the world of nature.

In Conclusion

Eiseley's world is a world of exception⁵⁴. One in which the natural and the cultural represent two poles of the human condition. Eiseley himself is unable to abide in either and wanders between the two. This gives his particular song the resonance of a wolf's howl. There is a violence there too. He sees the risk humanity is taking, he questions the rationality behind it; he loves the higher purpose that Francis Bacon saw for science, yet he sees that which he loves – science – turned to produce weapons of mass destruction and systematically destroying the world that sustains us. He feels betrayed and abandoned as a result.

So his wound, his betrayal and abandonment feed his vision: one that belongs to the outsider on the inside. His shamanic posture is palpable, he runs his search for meaning through personal experience. For him the great maps are ways to error. He finds truth in the minutiae of life. Death for him becomes an invitation as he has died, yet is not yet dead. He is as insubstantial as a dream:

My flesh, my own seemingly unique individuality,
was already slipping like flying mist ... away from
the little parcel of my bones.⁵⁵

For him meaning and incoherence co-exist⁵⁶, arising from the aspirations, fears and dreams of the human quest. Some wish to find meaning in the beauty of a rose, while others point to the diseased and tortured world and say, 'There is no God!' For Eiseley, the paradox is that there is room for both. His task is to both announce and mourn: thus he declares our finitude, our vulnerability and our terrible danger while mourning the loss of innocence and the passing of the human experiment. It is this ambivalence and the anxiety that drives it that brings to Eiseley's words and world such a trembling passion. He, the half-wolf cast out, fears the rise of the Fenris-wolf of Viking legend, the world devourer "waiting his moment under the deep-buried rocket silos of today".⁵⁷

Standing against this spectacle of ultimate ruin is the frail human phantom of his imagination, hoping for the best, fearing the worst. Yet, shaman as he is, he calls us to account. He does so with deep compassion, with love. "More rarely and more beautifully, perhaps, the profound mind in the close prison projects infinite love in a finite room".⁵⁸ Certainly the show is not over, the struggle for the future begins today.

Man is himself, like the universe he inhabits, like the demoniacal stirrings of the ooze from which he sprang, a tale of desolations. He walks in his mind from birth to death the long resounding shores of endless disillusionment. Finally, the commitment to life departs or turns to bitterness. But out of such desolation emerges the awesome freedom to choose – to choose beyond the narrowly circumscribed circle that delimits the animal being. In that widening ring of human choice, chaos and order renew their symbolic struggle in the role of titans. They contend for the destiny of the world.⁵⁹

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