

Commentary

THE CONTEMPLATION OF OTHERNESS

by *Richard E. Wentz*

I like to sit on the porch. In the Valley of the Sun the houses have patios, but a patio is a poor substitute for a porch. So when I found this little house among the junipers and scrub oak in Payson, Arizona, I was happy to see that it had a porch. Now I sit on the porch whenever I have the opportunity.

I sit—not doing anything and not being bored—just sit. One of the disciplinary practices of Zen Buddhism is *zazen*—just sitting—and the grace of God is knowing how to sit. Sitting was difficult to do when I was a child. I sat with my mother and dad on the front porch and found myself saying, “There is nothing to do!” Now I realize that that is a very wise saying: there really is *nothing* to do, and that is good. Let’s just sit and learn to do nothing.

I sat there on my porch. It was the middle of the afternoon. I put the book down, not consciously; it just gradually receded from my thoughts, from my vision—dissolved. I was looking across the meadow toward distant houses and the bush nob of the national forest. My eyes were open, but I was just sitting—contemplating nothing. There were no thoughts, no perceptions. I looked but I was not seeing. Then suddenly a tiny leaf on the oak tree in front of the porch took the shape of jackrabbit and imposed itself on the tall grass of the distant meadow. The leaf was a leaf, but out of the nothingness I had been contemplating there emerged a word, an impression. The word took shape in my mind and called that leaf something else—jackrabbit. And the nothingness became a panorama of otherness of which I was a part. I was seeing again, but seeing differently as I watched the delicate movement of the meadow.

The nothingness and the otherness are intimately related. It is the responsibility of humankind to discern that relationship. The discernment is the work of both scientist and theologian or philosopher. “‘There is no Excellent Beauty that hath not some strangeness in the Proportion,’ wrote [Francis] Bacon in his days of insight. Anyone who has picked up shells on a strange beach can confirm his observation. But man, modern man, who has not contemplated his otherness . . . has not realized the full terror and responsibility of existence” (Eiseley 1971, 148).

Contemplation is a key concept in the writings of Loren Eiseley. It is a term that must be linked with his persistent reference to otherness, if one is to understand Eiseley’s thought. “Otherness” is, of course, illusive as well as highly allusive. Many academics will shy away from its use. Nevertheless, as

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Lewis Thomas has said, "we are a spectacular, splended manifestation of life. We have language and can build metaphors as skillfully and precisely as ribosomes make proteins" (Thomas 1979, 16). It is this singular human propensity for the building of metaphors that makes "otherness" an essential metaphor in any attempt to reflect on the ultimate order and meaning of existence. We build metaphors because neither our consciousness, our minds, nor their referents can be circumscribed absolutely. For Eiseley, existence is fundamentally mysterious, our most effective response metaphorical. Mystery requires metaphor. Metaphor is the instrument that is a factor in all that is observed and affects the manner in which observed knowledge is applied. In the thought of Eiseley, all observation and analysis take place in the context of the contemplation of otherness. Epistemology is contemplative.

What is contemplated is otherness. Otherness is itself a metaphor referring to the manner in which all knowledge is relational. That is to say, knowledge is the result of awareness of encounter. Encounter confronts us with the realization that an other stands over against and in relationship to us, yet that other is at the same time part of our observation. What it is as "other" is partly the result of our observation, partly the result of its separateness. We live in otherness and must learn how to know it. Such knowledge is most effectively attained by way of contemplation. "It is through our minds alone," writes Eiseley, "that man passes like that swaying furious rider on the hayrick, farther and more desperately into the night. He is galloping—this twofold creature whom even Bacon glimpsed—across the storm-filled heath of time, from the dark world of the natural toward some dawn he seeks beyond the horizon" (Eiseley 1971, 148-49).

I have chosen to respond to Robert G. Franke's essay (1984) on Eiseley as religious scientist by calling attention to this unique feature of Eiseley's thought. I believe that the contemplation of otherness is central to his thinking and represents a significant contribution to contemporary religious thought. Franke has done us a great service in helping us begin the investigation of the religious character of the thought of Eiseley. He has examined the content and the style of Eiseley's writings and has demonstrated for us that the "message is essentially religious because he points the way for humanity's hope and salvation" (Franke 1984, 40). Maggie Ross, in a recently published work on spirituality, unabashedly identifies Eiseley's work not only as religious but as theological: "The great theologian and writer Loren Eiseley said that the event of most cosmic significance in his life was to accept a wild fox cub's invitation to play. The big man hunkered down on his forepaws in front of the tiny creature, gravely selected a bone from the pile outside the den to tuck between his own teeth, and proceeded to romp" (Ross 1984, 60). As theologian he was the creature whose mind had already galloped into the dawn beyond the horizon. It had already encountered an other, which embraced it and required the man to stop galloping for a moment and see himself in the playfulness of a fox cub. "I was trying to give birth," he wrote in 1959, "to a different self whose only expression lies again in the deeply religious words of Pascal 'you would not seek me had you not found me'" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 178).

Of course, Eiseley is not the theologian in the tradition of dogmatic or systematic theology. He is a theologian because he understands the otherness he contemplates to be a wholeness that is more than the sum of its parts. Eiseley wrote of "the great darkness of the ultimate Dreamer" (Eiseley 1969, 55), of "the Player [who] plays on all the corners of the world. Watching the percentage" (Eiseley 1975, 205). "Like the toad in my shirt," he wrote, "we were in the hands of God, but we could not feel him; he was beyond us, totally and terribly

beyond our limited senses" (Eiseley 1975, 57). His view of God was panentheistic—the seer and the seen were always locked in ultimate embrace. God is a wholly other, not an entirely other. He/She is Immanuel—God with us. It may not be appropriate, therefore, to characterize Eiseley's God (as Franke does) as "a manifest power that runs the universe" (Franke 1984, 32). Eiseley was a very subtle thinker, and it will not do to handle him too precipitously. He was wary of taxonomy, a fact that frustrated his fellow scientists and the academic charterhouse. "I have had the vague word 'mystic,' applied to me," he said, "because I have not been able to shut out wonder occasionally" (Eiseley 1971, 214).

The point is, it is possible to speak of Eiseley as theologian, as Ross has done. The shape of his theology is observed in the rich contours of his metaphors of otherness and in his insight into contemplation as intellectually justifiable, providing the frame of reference for other scientific and intellectual activity.

As one might suspect, there is a strong ethical current to the theology. As a naturalist and fossil hunter, he had discovered compassion in the concern of the Neanderthal for the remains of those who had died. He knew that humans have a great "capacity to love, not just [their] own species, but life in all its shapes and forms" (Eiseley 1968, 51). Technology not only tends to blind us to the otherness of which we are a part, but also causes us to cease striving against ourselves and strive only against others. We are conquered by "the exterior world with its mass-produced daydreams" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 134). We become instruments of power (another reason for not thinking of the ultimate as power). "Because his mind is directed outward upon this power torn from nature, he does not realize that the moment such power is brought into the human domain it partakes of human freedom. It is no longer safely *within* nature; it has become violent, sharing in human ambivalence and moral uncertainty" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 135).

According to Eiseley our capacity for love is also lost by the modern assumption that knowledge is the key to understanding the world. We live in an age that fallaciously equates "ethical advance with scientific progress in a point-to-point relationship" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 160). Thus, as society makes certain improvements and produces new inventions, "we assume the improvement of the individual, and are all the more horrified at those mass movements of terror" which so typify the times (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 160). Education by itself will not make ethical persons. "There is nothing which we cannot make natural," wrote Pascal, "there is nothing natural which we do not destroy" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 159). Modern humanity tends not to understand that it must learn to observe the wholeness of being, that wisdom is derived from the contemplation of that "titanic otherness" from which we have emerged and of which we are still part.

Scientists, scholars of religion, and theologians will probably ignore the richness of Eiseley's thought. To the scientists he will seem soft, lacking in rigor, unable to confine himself to careful reporting of his bone hunting. Sometimes he wrestled with the two visions of science that stirred in his soul: "I could be an empiricist with the best of them, I would be deceived by no more music" (Eiseley [1960] 1978, 161). To the scholars of religion, Eiseley is no exciting phenomenon. He established no cult, and the patterns of his religiosity seem safely entombed in the social ambience of our century or serve as a hangover from imbibing the nectars of nineteenth-century transcendentalism. And the theologians will dismiss him either for his lack of propositional orthodoxy or his neglect of systematic thrift. He is just "too literary" for most academics. All

three forms of intellectual truancy may give up on Eiseley because they do not understand the indispensability of metaphor and the lenses it provides for contemplating the otherness which no one can escape. Metaphor is not luxury; it is the vindication of literary power as essential to human understanding and communication.

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