

The Man in the Moon

Remembering Loren Eiseley

The year 2007 marks the centennial of the birth, and the thirtieth anniversary of the death, of the distinguished American scientist and essayist Loren Eiseley—and so gives us an opportunity to look back on this unique thinker and his elegant reflections on man's place in the universe. Ever since antiquity, mankind has put a human face on the sky. The ancients named the planets for gods and goddesses that looked like themselves, and populated the heavens by

connecting stellar dots to form familiar shapes. Thus, the blazing orb of the sun was transported across the sky by a horse-drawn Hellenic chariot (or, if you were Egyptian, by a Nilotic boat) and the shadowed surface of the moon became a smiling face gazing down on Earth. Even the conquest of space (as it once was so presumptuously called) represents, in reality, a modern variation on the same theme, announcing to all the world that the universe is but another piece of real estate, albeit distant, waiting for development.

Eiseley did not labor under such misconceptions. For him the universe would always be alien—even that part of it we call Earth. Or rather it is we, he would argue, who are the aliens, forever strangers in a strange land, doomed to drift rootlessly through space.

Eiseley knew what rootlessness was. A lonely child of the Nebraska plains, he came to manhood in the dust-bowl Depression, riding the rails in the box-car company of hobos. His mother was stone deaf and half-crazed with a madness that Eiseley always feared lurked in his own genes, just waiting to lurch out. Perhaps it was for this reason he never had children of his own. Instead, he was attracted to stray animals—dogs, foxes, or jack-rabbits, it did not matter which—sentient creatures who were his brothers under the skin, who knew and had come to terms with their own apartness, just as had he. An uneasy inhabitant of cities, he felt most at home in the solitude of nature that echoed the inner solitude of his soul. And when he wrote, the titles of his

books and essays mirrored that sense of aloneness: *The Immense Journey*, *The Night Country*, “Man Against the Universe,” “The Long Loneliness.”

“Nature,” Eiseley wrote in *The Unexpected Universe*, “contains that which does not concern us, and has no intention of taking us into its confidence.” But nature, Eiseley intuited, had also left us signs, messages embedded in strata or scattered among the stars. “Some of the messages cannot be read, but man will always try. He hungers for messages, and when he ceases to seek and interpret them he will no longer be man.”

Even so, our bold exploration of the universe must be matched, he insisted, by an even bolder exploration of our selves. “Man...may have come to the end of that wild being who had mastered the fire and the lightning. He can create the web but not hold it together, not save himself except by transcending his own image. For at the last, before the ultimate mystery, it is himself he shapes.”

In one of his most haunting essays, Eiseley described wandering before sunrise along a desolate beach strewn with the myriad corpses of sea creatures abandoned in the sand by an ebbing tide. In the distance he glimpsed the solitary figure of a beachcomber methodically bending down and repeatedly flinging objects far out into the sea. The beachcomber was rescuing starfish, one by one. “The stars,” the man said, “throw well. One can help them.” In a seeming act of folly, the “star thrower” had chosen life

over death, compassion over callousness, action over indifference. Could God with similar madness have once flung a handful of stars out into the universe like seeds, hoping against hope that humanity might take root in the cosmic night?

Before leaving our lasting imprint on Mars and other planets, Eiseley cautions, we who have already scarred

the Earth and littered its moon must curb our unbounded appetite for despoliation and instead earn redemption, for only then will the “Man in the Moon” smile down on us.

—*Stephen Bertman* is Professor Emeritus of Classics at Canada’s University of Windsor and the author, most recently, of *The Eight Pillars of Greek Wisdom*.