

A Critical Reading of Loren Eiseley's "The Star Thrower"- A Redeemer in Disguise

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Abstract

Loren Eiseley, a scientist cum writer records his experiences excellently in his magnum opus essay, "The Star Thrower", dedicated to the selfless act of the Star thrower, who defied Eiseley's ignorance and darkness and showed him the beacon light of knowledge and enlightenment. This paper presents Loren Eiseley's religious journey from a hopeless wanderer and a seeker to an enlightened and transformed being who earns the key to open the mysteries of the beautiful intentions and workings of collective consciousness of the universe. The essay vividly portrays Eiseley's reflections on various aspects through the lens of an experienced observer of man's role in the natural world and the universe. An attempt has also been made to analyse and appreciate critically the essay under study and bring out the best lessons man can learn from the immense journey of life's evolution.

The Star Thrower- A Redeemer in Disguise

"Man cannot exist spiritually without life...There looms, inexplicably, in nature something above the role men give her." – Loren Eiseley, The Star Thrower

Of all the mysteries that have caught the attention of innumerable men and women since time immemorial, the most intricate, impenetrable and irresolvable has been the mystery behind man's mind. Since man has learnt to identify himself as "I", "Me" and "Mine", the world has just transformed itself for him from the naive, innocent and wonderful phenomenon to something like a product to be won, conquered and used for the satisfaction for his self. Progress has become synonymous to feeding and expanding one's image before the world. And when the same pursuit of so called happiness is met with life's uncertainties and grim realities, disappointments, disillusionments and perversity set in, and the whole world seems to be merciless, futile, meaningless and a life long struggle between chaos and anti-chaos, good and evil, desire and reality and above all happiness and pain. In spite of all his incredible achievements and amount of pride he has gathered over his lifetime, performing miscellaneous feats, man has always felt a certain void in his definition of successful life. As he gains more age and experience, he understands there lurks in life, beyond the stars, under the deeps, innate in the inner depths of human consciousness, some transcendent lesson to be learnt, the wisdom which will redeem him from the complexity of the cobweb of life, give him that ultimate happiness which he was all along searching for, that elixir which will fill his dry void and enlighten him into the Creator's glory and grace. One such attempt to demystify and

decode life's essential lesson was made by Loren Eiseley, who considered his life as a religious journey, a pilgrimage to the Altar of the Great Face behind all creation.

According to W.H. Auden, as recorded in his preface to the book, *The Star Thrower*, the main theme of this essay "The Star Thrower" is, "Man as the quest hero, the wanderer, the voyager, the seeker after adventure, knowledge, power, meaning, and righteousness." When an ardent seeker has set out against all odds to discover the truth, Auden believes, "objects are each one surrounded with an aura radiating meaning to man alone." (18). Eiseley begins the essay by recounting his visit to Costabel, with a lot of unresolved questions and hopelessness which had made him feel restless and disquiet. He calls himself a skull, stripped off all hope and voice, devoid of pity and seeking solace through a revolving eye in the skull. He records how his love for the unexpected and the beautiful lead him into science as a scientist and anthropology. But Eiseley was looking for answers which science cannot provide. He felt instinctively that he needed something more which verged on a "miracle" for which, his life had been unconsciously a search: "There lurks constantly an unconscious plea to wait upon some transcendent lesson in man's life" (175).

Eiseley tried to convey that what identity man has built of his own, is just an illusion, not a reality: "Our identity is a dream. We are a process, not reality, for reality is an illusion of the daylight- the light of a particular day." (175). In fact, Eiseley felt the need for looking deeper still into the past to find the different roles man has played in different species before becoming a man. With such an inquisitive and peaceless mind, Eiseley takes a walk along the shores of Costabel which were filled with the debris of life, where thousands of professional shellers had crowded to pick up most mercilessly the living shells of the sea creatures washed ashore. Eiseley notes: "A kind of greedy madness sweeps over the competing collectors ... following one such episode, I met the Star Thrower" (171). Much far from that maddening crowd, Eiseley sees a gigantic rainbow of incredible perfection under whose foot, he saw a human figure kept bending down and kept throwing the struggling star fishes back into the waters one by one consciously. It seems as if life is showing its completely unknown side to Eiseley, who had felt hopeless then. As the star thrower told Eiseley: "The stars throw well. One can help them." (172). Eiseley immediately considered it a useless job and walked away from the place saying that he was not a collector. The rolling eye in his skull seemed to tell him that "the star thrower is a man, and death is running more fleet than he along every sea beach in the world" (173). Eiseley's scientific mind reiterated that attempt of the star thrower is futile before the power of the death and hence he chose to leave him alone and not become involved in his activity. Perhaps when the mind is restless, no positivity seems encouraging or invigorating. Eiseley is reminded of an old monk's advice that in a desert, the voices of God and the Devil are scarcely distinguishable. (173). The starfish on the beach are cast ashore against their will. Helpless to return to the surf through their own efforts, the starfish die if they stay ashore too long. They symbolise the lost souls who have washed out of the turbulent sea of life and are left at the mercy of the world. They are doomed at the hands of the shellers, unless they find the saviour who can give them life.

In the second section, Eiseley throws light on the artificial image of the demigod that man has created for himself with the new-found power of science. He reflects how man has abandoned his prehistoric protected instinctive life of nature and made his way out into the level plains of science by seeking an adventurous existence of self-generated ideas : “The encrusted eye in the stone speaks to us of undeviating sunlight; the calculated elliptic of Halley’s Comet no longer forecasts world disaster. The planet plunges on through a chill void of star years, and there is little or nothing that remains unmeasured” (173-174). Through this new-found weapon, man has become incredibly unpredictable and Eiseley realized that a kind of maleficent primordial power also persists in man’s mind as same as the one in the wandering dust storms of the exterior world (174). The conflict between good and evil, as a hidden dualism, has ever haunted man in different guises. This conflict has taken the shape of Form versus Chaos, in the modern world, so much so that Form has become an illusion of the time dimension.

In any case, Eiseley feels man’s has been a constant search for the ultimate lesson: “Deep-hidden in the human psyche there is a similar injunction...a plea to wait upon some transcendent lesson preparing in the mind itself” (175). Eiseley had always regrettably felt that the primitives were much wiser than the modern man in having understood that dark message. Eiseley’s reflections tell him of the potential danger which lurks behind man’s acquired power and the changes he was able to bring about: “The power to change is both creative and destructive – a sinister gift, which, unrestricted, leads onwards toward the formless and inchoate void of the possible.” (176).

It seems Eiseley’s coming to Costable was to find answers to numerous questions, not just relating to himself but to gain a wider scale of perception and understanding relating to the whole of man’s role in the natural world and the universe. At this juncture, Eiseley sees the nightmare brooding and gaining momentum in the dark and the powerful weapons of science seem to revenge themselves upon their creators in a secretive and incalculable measure:

The tools...were linked intangibly to the subconscious poltergeist aspect of man’s nature. The closer man and the natural world drew together, the more erratic became the behaviour of each. Huge shadows leaped triumphantly after every blinding illumination...The shadows had passed out of all human semblance; no societal ritual safely contained their posturing, as in the warning dance of the trickster...it was so gigantically real, the multiplied darkness threatened to submerge the carriers of the light...Darwin, Einstein, and Freud might be said to have released the shadows. Yet man had already entered the perilous domain that henceforth would contain his destiny (179).

One wonders, whether this destiny is the conscious choice of the proud man or has it come as the inevitable consequence of the inherent urge in man to master the world to his tunes. What was seen as a possible evolutionary process by these great men, has now all the more surmounted their expectations and is already moving towards its perilous doom. “Man’s powers were finite; the forces he had released in nature recognized no such limitations. They were the irrevocable monsters conjured up by a completely amateur sorcerer.” (179).

Eiseley remembers Goethe who had aptly and unpleasantly sensed the contesting war between the form and formless, chaos and anti- chaos beneath the smiling surface of nature, which the eminent Victorian biologists saw and yet refused to see (179). Taking a thread from Darwin's thesis and antithesis, Eiseley recollects Freud, the unparalleled master of the inner world, who found the assumed stable, secure sunlit province of the mind, as actually "a place of contending furies"(180). So unfathomable remains the mysterious mind of man, that Eiseley finds it as the one strong reason, which brought him to this desert coast of "Costable- the coast demanding shipwreck" (180). Perhaps Eiseley sensed that the final door of illumination and enlightenment is accessed only through the paths of chaos and debris. He has come to the shores of Costable with an ardent wish to know the ultimate meaning and purpose of life and death, which had made him relentless and want of peace. The actions of the shell collectors and the debris of the sea creatures and contrastingly the incredible effort of a lone star thrower seemed to aggravate his quest which he yearned hard to accomplish and realize.

Pondering over the revolving and watching eye of his mother constantly following him, Eiseley traces where the malady began. Years back when he had been to his childhood house, which though deserted, held some past painful memories, Eiseley came upon the old photographs of his mother. Looking at her snap shot he reflects:

Here it began, her pain and mine. The eyes in the photograph were already remote and shadowed by some inner turmoil. The poise of the body was already that of one miserably departing the peripheries of the human estate. The gaze was mutely clairvoyant and lonely. It was the gaze of a child who knew unbearable difference and impending isolation...Here on this faded porch it had begun- the long crucifixion of life (181).

This is a peep into Eiseley's writing technique of using personal experiences as bases for philosophical musings and observations upon man, his cultures, his environment, his achievements, and the dangers which face him in the future. Eiseley's melancholic countenance can be, to very large extent, ascribed to his problematic and lonely childhood when he felt neither the mother understood his childhood yearning nor the father had enough time to spend with him. These doubts, struggles and questions and the darker aspect of life has so much withered his confidence and hope that he preferred to get rid of such agonizing memories, and more specifically the revolving eye in the skull. It seemed to remind him pessimistically the biblical injunction, "Love not the world and the things that are in the world." In response, Eiseley gathers courage to declare:

But I do love the world," I whispered to a waiting presence in the empty room. "I love its small ones, the things beaten in the strangling surf, the bird, singing, which flies and falls and is not seen again." ... "I love the lost ones, the failures of the world." It was like the renunciation of my scientific heritage. The torn eye surveyed me sadly and was gone. I had come full upon one of the last great rifts in nature, and the merciless beam no longer was in traverse around my skull (182).

At this point, his courage makes him realize the power of bountiful love: “The expression of love projected beyond the species boundary by a creature born of Darwinian struggle, in the silent war under the tangled bank” (182). Owing to his new-found realization, he refuses to believe the misconceived dictum that there was no boon in nature. Nevertheless, a sparse mercy has persisted amid war, famine and death. The star thrower through his selfless benevolent action had unconsciously made the reassertion of the human right to define his frontier, enabling the supernatural touch the natural. He realizes that the star thrower’s act was “an assertion of value arisen from the domain of absolute zero” (182). Amid chaos, the form has revealed its hidden face just like the blooming of a lotus from the dirty waters. The darkness however large and strong, it ultimately cannot stop the emergence of an illumining light. All of Eiseley’s pessimism washes away along with the rising rift of enlightenment and he decides to mend his thoughts and join the star thrower:

For a creature, arisen from that bank and born of its contentions, had stretched out its hand in pity. Some ancient, inexhaustible, and patient intelligence, lying dispersed in the planetary fields of force or amidst the inconceivable cold of interstellar space, had chosen to endow its desolation with an apparition as mysterious as itself... I had been unbelieving. I had walked away from the star thrower in the hardened indifference of maturity. But thought mediated by the eye is one of nature’s infinite disguises. Belatedly, I arose with a solitary mission. I set forth in an effort to find the star thrower (183).

Eiseley has gradually come to terms with the contending forces of life. He understands that just like the universe, man is also a tale of desolations, walking “from birth to death the long resounding shores of endless disillusionment.” (183). But in this process, often man’s commitment to life departs or turns to bitterness. Through his personal experience, Eiseley says that only “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 a world.” (183). Ultimately the onus lies on man, who has to decide whether he will let the negative forces to discourage his life or through his resourcefulness he will take the initiative to introduce a positive change in the dark scenario. He has to learn to be the change to change his perspective towards life. He has that freedom to choose. The only thing needed is an urge to take an ennobling risk, to courageously set an example when all else is contradictory. The star thrower was an outstanding example of such courage.

In confessing to love even the lost ones and the failures, Eiseley had indeed taken an initiative to renounce his scientific legacy which has only taught him to be an objective suspicious experimenter. Eiseley regretfully reconsiders his act of walking away from the star thrower in utter disbelief and “hardened indifference of maturity”. In terms of scientific heritage and experience he felt, he had nothing to say, because then he was an observer and a scientist. In his ignorance, he had considered the star thrower ‘mad’ and his acts, foolish. Hence he had chosen not to associate with or

involve in futile attempts of the star thrower. In fact, his burdened mind had even refused to see the rainbow's attempt to attach itself to earth (183). He was blind to nature's miracles and wonders. But now he is determined to remove forever the veil of science from his vision and seek the star thrower who was the odd man out of the mad race of destructive men. In a different domain beyond his own, Eiseley at last found the star thrower still busy at his work and the many-hued rainbow still lurking and wavering tentatively beyond him.

The star thrower represents several different themes. He represents the forces of life and goodness on the beach in contrast to the other shell collectors. He also represents a spiritual figure who gives himself to the duty of saving lost souls. This time with full awareness and involvement, courageously and silently, Eiseley picked up the still-living star fishes and threw them back into the waters. "Call me another thrower," whispered Eiseley as he started associating himself with that life-saving activity. He is sure, like him many others would understand the implication of such a benevolent act and would join them. He felt himself as a part of that multi-coloured rainbow which projected unexplainably into the natural providing him the visible ideal model of completeness- "the circle of perfection" (184), which man had continuously laboured to pursue. For Eiseley, the ever-widening pursuit has come to a satisfactory end and he feels immense bliss with his sense of accomplishment. The ultimate happiness lies not at the destination, but in the benign journey itself: "I could feel the movement in my body. It was like a sowing- sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale... I flung and flung again while all about us roared the insatiable waters of death... The task was not to be assumed lightly, for it was men as well as starfish that we sought to save." (184). Strong conviction and faith reverberate strongly through these powerful lines. Earlier what seemed as the only collector- Death, is brimming with full-fledged life. Man who had seemed to be eternally doomed to fall in the quagmire of darkness, has been saved in the eleventh hour by the selfless, unconditional love projected by the star thrower: "We had lost our way, I thought, but we had kept, some of us, the memory of the perfect circle of compassion from life to death and back again to life- the completion of the rainbow of existence" (184). The primitive hunters had known the cycle when they offered "obeisance to the souls of the hunted." A sense of gratitude overpowers Eiseley remembering the old legend that "he who gained the gratitude of animals gained help in need from the dark wood" (184).

Many would have questioned the star thrower as to what difference he could make as a lone attempter in carrying out a futile activity. Perhaps it was the voice of his conscience, which was strong enough to urge the thrower to act courageously though alone. It might not seem to make any considerable material difference to man, but obviously has made a very big difference to the star fishes who are fighting for life against the ever-binding death. This in turn, the wise men would realize, has uplifted the thrower's life spiritually:

I picked up a star whose tube feet ventured timidly among my fingers while, like a true star, it cried soundlessly for life. I saw it with an unaccustomed clarity and cast far out. With it, I flung myself as forfeit, for the first time, into some unknown dimension of existence. From Darwin's tangled bank of unceasing struggle, selfishness, and death, had

arisen, incomprehensibly, the thrower who loved not man, but life. It was the subtle cleft in nature before which biological thinking had faltered (185).

Eiseley possesses within himself both Darwin's passion for scientific facts and some of Thoreau's transcendental love for nature. Eiseley sensed that though in these times of desolation, man had reached an invisible island, yet he is on the safe shore which was known to the primitives who "had sensed intuitively that man cannot exist spiritually without life" (185); and that life springs from pure love and compassion. A thought persisted in Eiseley that "there is a hurler of stars, and he walks, because he chooses, always in desolation, but not in defeat" (185). A transformed Eiseley has decided to walk in the storm "for the uses of life" "with the knowledge of the discontinuities of the unexpected universe" (185). The task of the thrower has taught him the valuable lesson that only the hidden teacher in nature can impart to the seeking devotee- "There looms, inexplicably, in nature something above the role men give her." (185) Through the forest is the way back home, through darkness is the door to enlightenment!

Eiseley's Unique Style

One finds in this essay, a constant interaction between creative and intellectual activity. Angyal, Eiseley's biographer contents that Eiseley's "concealed" form conceals or frames the subject matter by a personal approach, which well serves as a rhetorical device to engage the reader's attention. (Angyal 39). Eiseley's essays become "a highly elaborate form, with frequent literary references and allusions, numerous quotations, multiple themes, and an interwoven structure of contemplative concerns" and it becomes a "casual and informal, though sophisticated technique" which combines "memory, landscape, and visual imagination" (Angyal 39-41).

E. Fred Carlisle in his research article, "The Literary Achievement of Loren Eiseley" says that Eiseley, who tried to write honestly from his experience, searched for an ideal way of expressing, an adequate geometry, a new kind of an idiom, the mysterious and contradictory nature of his scientific findings. He intertwined his personal and professional life in the form of an epic story of science and imaginative exploration and rendered it artistically. "Eiseley intertwined autobiographical, scientific, figurative, and metaphysical elements into a new idiom and a unique vision, and that is the heart of his literary achievement." (Carlisle, 39). Noting Eiseley's use of hybridity, Carlisle further states,

[Eiseley] concentrates on the individual and on humanity within the structure of predictability (and predictability) defined largely by anthropology and biology. In his writing the systematic activity and structure of science merge with the search for the self within that structure. Science, then, is simultaneously a pursuit of the self and an attempt to make increasingly closer and closer contact with reality. The personal and universal dimension of science merge in Eiseley's books, as the quest for knowledge of reality and knowledge of oneself become one (Carlisle, 45).

Peter Heidtmann, in his "Locating Loren Eiseley" acclaims Eiseley as an extraordinary poet:

... akin to his nineteenth – century favourites, Emerson and Thoreau, Eiseley... retains an inextinguishable longing for a Transcendent reality beyond this contingent world... Eiseley is philosophical in his probing of perennial questions about human life. Yet he is most noteworthy not for any original insights into the nature of problems themselves, but because of the evocative way in which he deals with them. It is his way of seeing, his vision, that is ultimately most memorable, and in this sense, he functions as a poet.... Eiseley suggests that his fundamental endeavour is not to seek meaning through his inquiries, but to enact and re- enact by means of expensive language the relentless quest of the fugitive. It is primarily in this manner that he seeks self- definition, and the sympathetic reader comes to share both in the process and in the state of being achieved (Heidtmann, 211).

The above analysis of the essay and the thorough study of its significance proves Eiseley's *Star Thrower* to be a redeemer in disguise. Angyal in his essay, "Loren Eiseley as an American Romantic Thinker" well says : "Eiseley's late reflective and speculative natural history essays that, taken together, suggest how he came to value the natural world as an object of spiritual reflection and contemplation, as a source for the renewal of hope and joy, awe and wonder, and as source for the perpetual renewal of the human spirit" (Angyal 74). The lesson that the essay imparts, proves to be an eye- opener for the readers and will help them to reconsider and redefine man's role in the universe.

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