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Tom Lynch, and Susan N. Maher, *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eiseley* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 351 pp.



For a writer who delved so deeply into the mysteries of science and nature, only a scholarly work that explores the Eiseley canon with similar profundity could do justice to his legacy. *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eiseley* is precisely that. Comprised of fourteen chapters which cover a range of different topics, *Artifacts and Illuminations* accomplishes much in the field of Eiseley studies.

The collection is prefaced with a useful introduction by the editors, Tom Lynch and Susan N. Maher, which chronicles the scholarly territory covered by the different contributors. It begins with a brief summation of Eiseley's legacy, namely that he was one of the foremost practitioners of the nature essay, and that he had a particularly keen ability to expertly blend scientific knowledge with humanistic values, a rare and treasured quality. But that same ability to combine scientific and humanistic knowledge, Lynch and Maher point out, has proven a hindrance to the literary study of the Eiseley canon, since scholars are sometimes tightly confined to their own specialties and not able to engage deeply with both the scientific and literary depths of Eiseley's work.

This deficiency is in large part what makes this collection so important, as many of the chapters are oriented toward its correction. As Lynch and Maher make clear in their introduction, the existing body of Eiseley scholarship is largely comprised of book-length works that have been almost entirely biographical. *Artifacts and Illuminations* helps fill the gap. The introduction concludes with Lynch and Maher providing helpful commentary regarding the future of Eiseley studies, for example suggesting a gendered reading of Eiseley as a topic in need of scholarship.

The scholarly pieces open with two analyses of the effects of Eiseley's youth on his writing. Susan Hanson examines the many forms of loss in Eiseley's upbringing and how they influenced his work in "'The Bay of Broken Things': The Experience of Loss in the Word of Loren Eiseley." She goes on to explore how the losses of Eiseley's childhood informed his spirituality, a pervasive element in his writing.

M. Catherine Downs then contributes a contextual understanding for Eiseley's habit of alluding to youthful wanderings in "'Never Going to Cease My Wandering': Loren Eiseley and the American Hobo." In the time when Eiseley grew up, Downs explains, there existed a culture of "hoboing," often involving cheap or illicit train travel, which Eiseley partook in. Downs examines how these experiences and encounters with the

“hobos” of the era contributed greatly to Eiseley’s fascination with the discarded and disposable elements of American society.

Of perhaps greatest interest to EASLCE members and *Ecozon@* readers are the many ecocritical pieces in the collection. In “‘The Places Below’: Mapping the Invisible Universe in Loren Eiseley’s Plains Essays,” Susan N. Maher analyzes how place affected the nature of Eiseley’s work, particularly the flat landscape of the Nebraska Plains where he grew up, arguing that “Eiseley was drawn to space and objects that elicited his sense of multiple dimensions” such as underground places like sewers. The Plains and their vast flatness, Maher maintains, are what led to Eiseley’s interest in “the vertical dimension over the horizontal.”

The next essay, Michael A. Bryson’s “Unearthing Urban Nature: Loren Eiseley’s Explorations of City and Suburb,” investigates another prominent landscape in Eiseley’s writing, and one that has become increasingly in vogue: urban places. Bryson argues that the urban landscape gives Eiseley an ideal platform from which to comment on contrasting views of nature in cities: that they are both “the antithesis of nature” and also “all part of a complex urban ecosystem, a dynamic mosaic in which imperiled nature interacts with humans and their built environment.” Writing about urban nature enabled Eiseley to expose these tensions and “help persuade us that urbanized areas are important sites of human contact with nature.” What’s more, considering that urban nature writing has only proliferated since Eiseley’s time, it marks him as an important precursor.

One of the hallmarks of Eiseley’s style is his usage of anthropomorphism, a topic which Kathleen Boardman expertly explores in her chapter “Anthropomorphizing the Essay: Loren Eiseley’s Representations of Animals.” Boardman’s piece contains a variety of revealing criticism Eiseley received from his contemporaries, along with evidence that Eiseley was personally hurt by these attacks. This does a lot to give context for the chance Eiseley took in using anthropomorphism in his work, and the damage this did to his reputation at a time during which anthropomorphism was seriously looked down upon, even loathed. Boardman’s work illustrates how ahead of his time, and even courageous, Eiseley was in using anthropomorphism to maintain an “openness to the possibility of shared characteristics” between people and animals.

Out of the many ways in which this collection expands the field of Eiseley scholarship, one of the most groundbreaking is almost certainly the attention paid by two contributors to Eiseley’s poetry, which had been heretofore almost totally overlooked by critics. In “‘The Borders between Us’: Loren Eiseley’s Eco-poetics,” Tom Lynch makes a convincing argument that Eiseley was one of the first practitioners of what is now referred to as eco-poetics. Lynch first chronicles Eiseley’s career as a poet and then identifies and analyzes a key element of Eiseley’s poetry that should make him a foundational figure in the development of eco-poetry: “an appreciation for the evolutionary matrix of all living things” (128).

Mary Ellen Pitts argues in her essay “Artifact and Idea: Loren Eiseley’s Poetic Undermining of C.P. Snow” that through his poetry, Eiseley was able to disprove C.P. Snow’s famous assertion that scientists and literary intellectuals are separated by a wide

gulf. Not only did Eiseley directly confront the issue in his essay “The Illusion of the Two Cultures,” but he continued to do so throughout his poetic output. Pitts examines in particular four poems from *Notes of an Alchemist*.

Another focus of the collection is the series of chapters devoted to comparing Eiseley’s essays with other prominent writers, which include Dante Alighieri, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Burroughs, and Carl Jung. Jonathan Weidenbaum’s analysis of the connection between Eiseley and Emerson in “Emerson and Eiseley: Two Religious Visions” focuses on the way Emerson’s transcendentalism both overlapped with and differed from Eiseley’s spirituality. Weidenbaum goes on to argue that Eiseley’s spirituality, expressed in his writing, was a major contribution to the endemic American spirituality that found its first expression in the work of the New England transcendentalists.

In “Epic Narratives of Evolution: John Burroughs and Loren Eiseley,” Stephen Mercier compares Eiseley to his important American nature writing predecessor, John Burroughs, with special emphasis on their mutual interest in evolution. Mercier points out that Burroughs “was one of the first American nature writers to fold Darwinian ideas into his essays,” which allowed Eiseley to build on the tradition and popularize evolution as a theme in nature writing.

For European scholars, the connections explored between the Eiseley oeuvre and Dante Alighieri and Carl Jung establish an interesting transatlantic exchange. In “In a Dark Wood: Dante, Eiseley, and the Ecology of Redemption,” Eiseley scholar Anthony Lioi argues that one of Eiseley’s most well-known essays, “The Star Thrower,” emulates Dante’s *Comedy* with what Lioi labels “the ecology of redemption.” The penultimate chapter of the book, written by John Nizalowski and entitled “Eiseley and Jung: Structuralism’s Invisible Pyramid,” explores Eiseley’s interest in the writings of Carl Jung and the influence of Jung’s theories on Eiseley, particularly Jung’s idea of the “collective unconscious.”

*Artifacts and Illuminations* concludes with Dimitri Breschinsky’s reflections on his translations of Eiseley into Russian in “From the American Great Plains to the Steppes of Russia: Loren Eiseley Transplanted.” Breschinsky explains his motivations for introducing Russian audiences to Eiseley: his hope to expose Russians to some of the West’s greatest literary works. Breschinsky also goes into fascinating detail on his methods for translating the work, and describes the instances when his work was censored. One of the most elucidating elements of the chapter is when Breschinsky provides an explanation for why a nature writing tradition never emerged in Russia as it did in the US. The final chapter of the book ends with Breschinsky’s sobering reflections on the lackluster reception of his work, despite its critical acclaim, and the various ways the internet has complicated his mission.

Past and future readings of Eiseley have been illuminated by this profound and expansive collection of essays. Anyone with a fondness for Eiseley or the journey of the American nature writing tradition will find *Artifacts and Illuminations* of immense interest.