

The Judgement of the Birds

Analytical Essay

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Loren Eiseley was born in Nebraska in 1907. Eiseley was an American anthropologist, educator, philosopher, and natural science writer, who taught and published books from the 1950s through the 1970s (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Loren Eiseley”) Eiseley was well known for his nature essays that introduced a strong autobiographical element into the field of anthropology and contemporary nature writing. (524) At his death, he was Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and History of Science at the University of Pennsylvania. (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Loren Eiseley”) This is a critical essay analyzing *The Judgment of the Birds*, which is a piece from his 1957 publication, *The Immense Journey*. (525)

When one analyzes *The Judgment of the Birds* (*The Immense Journey*, 1957) a contradiction may be raised towards the end of the piece. Eisley has a choice to document his experience in one of two ways. The first choice is more symbolic and defines his personal interpretation of a marvelous experience he has with an orb-weaving spider: “*In the days of the frost seek a minor sun*” (533) While the second choice is a more clear and concise record of the event: “*One specimen of Epeira observed building a web in a street light*” (533) Eisley chose to exclude the first quote from his mental note of the experience. His reasoning is as follows: “*It was better, I decided, (...) to record [a] marvel, not to define it's meaning*” (533) When Eiseley refers to recording a marvelous event, he is referring to his first choice: “*One specimen of Epeira observed building a web in a street light*” (533) Likewise, when Eisley refers to defining the meaning of a marvelous event, he is referring to his second choice: “*In the days of the frost seek a minor sun*” (533). The contradiction rises directly from his reasoning. Eiseley states, that it is better to record an experience, rather than define its meaning. **If this were to be held true, then why would Eiseley bother to even inform the reader of his second choice?**

Was Eisley merely examining a spider in a stoplight, or was he contributing to the greater wealth and general well being of human kind? Don't you agree that it's a bit peculiar that Eiseley's argument, or reasoning for excluding the first choice from his mental note was: "*It was better, I decided, (...) to record their marvel, not to define it's meaning*" (533) This is a direct contradiction to his original interpretation on the previous page "*(...) [I] t has gotten itself a kind of courage by looking at a spider in a street lamp.*" (533) At first, one might've thought they've been fooled by an elaborate trick created by Eiseley. "*It was better, I decided, for the emissaries returning from the wilderness, even if they were merely descending from a stepladder, to record their marvel, not to define its meaning. (...) In the end I merely made a mental note: One specimen of Epeira observed building a web in a street light.*" (533) It may be unclear as to why Eiseley would inform readers about his personal experience in a way that defines what it meant to him, followed by an attempt to persuade the reader into thinking that we should only record our marvels rather than define what they symbolize to us. As one delves even deeper into the essay they may be inclined to reread those lines over and over again.

Take careful note to try to re-discover the elaborate message hidden within these particular lines: "*In that way it would go echoing on through the minds of men, each grasping at that beyond out of which the miracles emerge and which, once defined, ceases to satisfy the human need for symbols.*" (533) Specifically hidden within this excerpt is advice to those whom had experienced a miracle and wish to share it with others: "*[Miracles] once defined, [cease] to satisfy the human need for symbols.*" (533)

To summarize in my own words, what I think Eiseley is trying to say is that the spider was a symbol of courage to him, but he realized that maybe someone else in the world is in search of a symbol for hope, purpose, or even just a sign of peace. Why should we limit a definition of a miracle strictly to “courage” thus prohibiting other people from associating their own symbol or meaning to a particular event? If you were in Eiseley’s shoes, would you not agree that it would be wrong to define that this spider is a symbol of courage and a symbol of courage only. Eisley attributes the word “heroism” with courage in this particular experience he has with the orb-weaving spider:

“Nevertheless it brought the birds back into my mind, and that faraway song which had traveled with growing strength around a forest clearing years ago - a kind of heroism, a world where even a spider refuses to lie down and die if a rope can still be spun on to a star.” (532) However, who’s to say what a particular reader might associate or symbolize heroism with? Can it only be associated with courage, or is it possible that there may be somebody that attributes the word heroism with an alternative? Eiseley declares that the human mind is a very remarkable thing: *“The mind, it came to me as I slowly descended the ladder, is a very remarkable thing; it has gotten itself a kind of courage by looking at a spider in a street lamp (...) But as I hesitated, it became plain that something was wrong, the marvel was escaping”* (533) What was the marvel escaping? “[T]he human need for symbols” (533). I feel as if this answers our initial question as to why Eiseley bothered to inform readers about his second choice, which inexplicitly associates courage with the orb-weaver: *“In the days of the frost seek a minor sun”* (533).

If it were not for the discovery of Eiseley’s contradiction amongst himself and the discovery of this revelation, we may not have been able to fully understand the

interpolation of this event with all over events within the story. Consider page 527, when Eiseley is describing his experience with the crow: "*Around and around went the wings. It needed only a little courage, only a little shove from the window ledge to enter that city of light.*" Does this not correspond with Eiseley's symbolical interpretation of the orb-weaver? Consider his admiration of the human mind once more: "*The mind, it came to me as I slowly descended to the ladder, is a very remarkable thing; it has gotten itself a kind of courage by looking at a spider in a street lamp. Here was something that ought to be passed on to those who will fight our final freezing battle with the void.*" (522) This directly corresponds with himself, I mean after all, Eiseley seems to not only be talking about the human mind, but Eiseley is talking about **his** mind. Eiseley describes how his mind has gotten a form of courage, which in the quote from the excerpt describing his experience with the crow: "*Around and around went the wings. It needed only a little courage, only a little shove from the window ledge to enter that city of light.*" (527) He admittedly informs the reader that he was in need of a sign of courage, and with that symbol, he could enter that city of light. Afterwards, he coincides to get dressed and proceed with his day. This explains that Eiseley apparently was in need of a little courage that morning, thus the crow provided.

Does this also correspond with Eiseley's experience in the Badlands? I leave this for the reader to decide, for I cannot allow myself to define what one should associate with a particular event. It is also possible that I've made a mistake, and I've been misguided in my search for an answer as to why Eiseley contradicted himself. Then again, maybe I'm contradicting myself merely just by agreeing with Eiseley. The moral of the story is that I am just a man, and all that is of mankind requires symbols.

Works Cited

- Finch, Robert, and John Elder. "The Judgment of the Birds." *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990. 524-33. Print.
- "Loren Eiseley." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 17 Feb. 2014. Web. 24 Feb. 2014.