

Storm Cloud in the Shape of a Hornet: Clayton Eshleman's Self-Annihilation Waltz in *The Book of Eternal Death*

A Preface to the chapbook by Mark Tursi

What does one do when Psyche, “the magical creature of the mind,” drops a line in your head like, “I want to kiss Hitler’s tits”? If you’re Clayton Eshleman, you use the line in a poem; you don’t reject it, and you certainly don’t shy away from it because it is unsettling (if not comic). If so, Psyche will abandon you and leave you with nothing but “the dopey ego.” This is, at any rate, according to Eshleman in an often funny and wildly insightful 1993 interview with Duane Davis.¹ The poet was responding to what he saw as a kind of cult-like quality that was (and perhaps still is) pervasive in MFA programs and the publishing industry that honors the “hypersensitive good guy,” but that rejects the “real areas of investigation for which poetry exists.” This anecdote doesn’t exactly serve as an overarching framework for which to understand Eshleman’s vast oeuvre, but it does provide a glimpse at the tone, texture and tenor of what one might expect when reading the e-chapbook published here.²

¹ All the quotations in this paragraph are from the Davis interview, which was first published in *Waste Paper #33* and later reprinted in *Companion Spider: Essays*; Clayton Eshleman; Wesleyan University Press, 2001. As far as I know, Eshleman never actually used this line in a poem. Rather, he was attempting to explain the kind of absurdity involved in self-censorship, and what might happen if a poet like Marvin Bell encounters the “Hitler line” quoted above in a poem about “walking along the river, feeling the autumn and looking at the beeches” (283). But, the line does recall another stanza from Eshleman’s poem, “The Bridge at the Mayan Pass.” He writes, “Billy Graham in bra & / garters, like the Rhine- / bold girl, serving the / pitiful legions of Eshleman” from *Coils*, 1970. Certainly, this is more comic and less unsettling than the allusion to Hitler, but still the irony and absurdity seem of a similar ilk.

² In a more explicit rhetorical mode, Eshleman essentially explains the ideas imbedded in this anecdote in an essay providing advice and suggestions for novice poets. In his essay, “Novices: A Study of Poetic Apprenticeship,” also published in *Companion Spider*, he writes, “I want to do here what the Introduction to Poetry textbooks don’t do: to address the initial chaos as well as the potential coherence involved in making a commitment to poetry, and suggest that blocks and chasms are not to be avoided but are to be worked through and assimilated” (3).

Many readers may know Clayton Eshleman for his explorations of the “Paleolithic Imagination” and his significant and continuing contribution to ethnopoetic and mythopoetic discourse. His early preoccupation with the birthplace of image-making, especially as represented by the primordial pictures and prehistoric paintings inscribed on the cave walls in Lascaux, Cambarelles and Trois Frères Caves in the Dordogne region of Southern France continue to dominate much of his thinking as seen recently in *Juniper Fuse*, and even more recently in *An Alchemist with One Eye on Fire*, just released by Black Widow Press. In these works and others, he continues to explore the relationship between image, history, language, mythology and consciousness. Or, perhaps readers might know Eshleman for his translations of the Césaire Vallejo³, Pablo Neruda, Antonin Artaud and Aimé Césaire.⁴ His name might also be recognizable as one of the founding editors of the literary journals *Folio*, *Caterpillar* or *Sulfur*. Or, perhaps his association with poets like Paul Blackburn, Jerome Rothenberg and Robert Kelly might resonate with other readers. Others still, might know his poetry, essays and hybrids that crisscross movements and philosophies as diverse as the archetypal theories of Carl Jung and James Hillman; the poetry of Charles Olson and William Blake; the paintings of Francis Bacon; and, the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin. Or, many readers may have read one of Eshleman’s more than 25 published works like *Mexico & North*, *Hades in Manganese*, *Fracture*, *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, *Juniper Fuse*, *My Devotion*, and many more. At any rate, Eshleman’s name will likely be familiar to most readers, but the work in this chapbook,

³ Eshleman’s new translations of Vallejo’s collected works was just released by the University of California Press: [Vallejo\[1\].pdf](#)

⁴ See *Conductors of the Pit: Poetry Written in Extremis in Translation*; Soft Skull Press, 2005. In this text, an expansion of an earlier 1988 version, Eshleman translates poets who “induct and order materials from the subconscious as well as from those untoward regions of human experience that defy rational explanation” (xv). The book features an amazing array of international poets who write in a variety of different languages: Artaud, Holan, Césaire, Vallejo, Csoóri, Breton, Neruda, Radnóti, Rimbaud, Hierro, Bador, Juhász, and Szöcs.

The Book of Eternal Death, may surprise even avid fans and longtime readers of this poet's work. It is work he wrote in 1964 and recently re-discovered himself while cleaning his summer house. It is work with multiple "registers" from a Beat-kind of stream-of-consciousness to an almost haiku like slice of simplistic and deft images.

But, then again, Eshleman's work has always evolved, changed, shaped and re-shaped forms of expression and poetic discourse, so this fact alone will come as no surprise. In other words, he has always challenged assumptions about poetry and reality, including his own methods and operations. In the introduction to a 1996 interview with Eshleman, Keith Tuma characterizes the poet's work in this way:

... it is not a work easily excerpted—to follow it over time is to meet turmoil, self-negations, and self-projections; excavations in the rubble of art, myth, event, and media spectacle; evolving encounters with a disparate body of cultural materials, exemplary persons, and personal friends; dreams and dream discourse; propositions shadowed by laughter, ecstasy, and farce; grotesque realism propelling a struggle for meaningful utterance and meaningful community.⁵

As he tells us in his own forward to the chapbook, Eshleman wrote *The Book of Eternal Death* prior to his visits to the Dordogne region and his association with the so-called Deep Imagists. Therefore, it is before his supposed "minding of the underworld"⁶ and his interest (at least explicitly) in the Paleo-Ecology of the contemporary mind. However, one can see the nascent stages of this kind of "minding" or "conducting of the pit" as it were. As you read, you will encounter multiple poetic signatures and find influences from writers as diverse as César Vallejo, William Blake, Charles Olson, and Allen Ginsberg. Compare, for example, the almost haiku-like simplicity from this

⁵ This interview was first published in *Contemporary Literature*, summer 1996, volume 37, #3, and then reprinted in *Companion Spiders: Essays*, Clayton Eshleman, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

⁶ A phrase I take from Paul Christensen's insightful work, *Minding the Underworld: Clayton Eshleman & Late Postmodernism*, Black Sparrow Press, 1991.

passage in section 21: “In the front window in a dirty white pan a crab trussed in hemp / struggling” with the very Beat-like passage below:

23] And they are twisting, Lord, are they twisting in the cosmic night, the legs drive, the arms, the elbows, the knees—hooded cobras—sway, yeah yeah they are twisting, Lord, twisting in the cosmic—the rhythm shifts—day.

It is always daybreak, put on your sun. Shoulders work through the walls, muscle underground. I see a map of America, no states but a corral from New York east to Los Angeles west, and the twisters, twisting, twist. Yeah! Driving under the starry midnight, in the cool air, the cities have been burned, Korea has been hung: as if in a play, the men are dressed as Bunnies, the blacks as whites, twisting, fluid pistons driving, yeah yeah driving in the night.

The Beat quality in Eshleman’s earlier work is nothing new—he has been associated with Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg before—but here, readers can glimpse this impulse in what Ginsberg would call it’s “pure nakedness of mind.” There has always been an anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment, anti-ideology and anti-bourgeois impulse in Eshleman’s work that also parallels a lot of Beat writing. He even makes this explicit towards the end of the chapbook: “If to write poetry is to be obedient to anything or anyone, let me chop wood forever” (section 44).

Eshleman moves deftly through multiple poetic, narrative and rhetorical modes. Most of the individual sections could be isolated and regarded as individual prose poems, or considered together as chapters of a unique kind of memoir when considered in its entirety. In this book, we see the beginnings of this poet’s submersion into language and the unconscious. In a later work, he writes, “The poet’s resistance to psychoanalysis is a resistance to discovering his unconscious motives for writing poetry—as if discovering a severing—a witch with a long nose intruding into the play-house window, discovering what the children are “really” doing there.”⁷ Certainly, this poet does not resist delving

⁷ from *Companion Spider*, page 58.

into the unconscious, uncovering “immense delight” as well as the unsettling and monstrous; e.g. the possibility of the self as a “grotesque jungle flower” and the heart, “where my bowels lie.” We also find the early inklings of what becomes one of Eshleman’s predominant metaphors for the creative process and the mind/poetry/unconscious: the spider and the spider web. In section 34, he writes: “The anger, the frustration, the horrible glow of the red lights. The energy of the Kimchi Kabana is a black sea, a driving rain of sewage in the abdomen of the cosmic spider, the false bowels of Korea.” In several essays from *Companion Spider*, including the title piece, Eshleman elaborates a bizarre and interesting hallucinatory experience he had in Kyoto in 1962. After leaving Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger’s home, he experiences what seems like a kind of revelation or a “sublime moment” wherein the image of the spider becomes a kind of poetic totem for him. This chapbook reveals one of Eshleman’s early attempts at grappling with this early, revelatory experience.

This chapbook will prove interesting to Eshleman scholars for a number of reasons. We see the earliest hints of what Mikhail Bakhtin and others have called “grotesque realism.” Although Eshleman, in a personal correspondence, mentions that Bakhtin’s influence comes much later, I contend that this poet’s disquiet with reality and human experience as represented in the bizarre and uncanny begins to take shape in this chapbook. In an email, Eshleman writes the following:

I had not read Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* in 1963/64. I did not read it until the summer of 1973 and its first effect is to be found in *The Gull Wall* (BSP, 1975). There is no carnivalesque atmosphere in TBOED, to my reading. That work constantly starts over again, and finishes without being finished, trying to hold material from various time pockets in place in a created present.

It's true that there is little of the *carnavalesque* or of Bakhtin in this book, but, surely, the early representation and re-creation of the grotesque via a poignant and explicit realism (i.e. grotesque realism) seems to make its debut in an early incarnation:

Thus did I ask Allen Ginsberg why he lay on his left side & ate dung? He answered: 'To raise men to a vision of the infinite.' This, I said, I have heard before & it is true, marvelous & true. But your form is your own body; such is one crucifixion after another. Why has man's form become the shape of his own body? Why has the poet become a reporter of generative hell? Even if powerful, these are not visions of eternity.

In this section and succeeding ones, Eshleman explores the "awful spiritual colors" of human kind and the wretchedness this may (or may not) produce. The anecdotal conversation with Ginsberg is revealing: both poets are known for expanding what is or is not "appropriate" language for a poem by subverting and undermining prescribed limitations; anything can go into a poem, they put forward, including the scatological and the vulgar. Eshleman's notion of "time pockets in place in a created present" is that 'cosmic spider's abdomen' mentioned earlier, the very bowels of Seoul, and, by extension, the narrator's unconscious mind.

In the introduction to Eshleman's *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985*, Eliot Weinberger writes,

Eshleman is the primary American practitioner of what Mikhail Bakhtin called "grotesque realism." It is an immersion in the body; not the body of the individual, the "bourgeois ego," but the body of all: the "brimming of over abundance" of decay, fertility, birth, growth, death. Like the collective body, it is unfinished, exaggerated; protuberances and apertures are prominent; animals, plants, objects, the world blend into its undifferentiated and essentially joyous swirl. The mask is its primary device: not as concealer of identity, but as image of each thing becoming something else. (14)

This serves well to describe *The Book of Eternal Death*; it is a search for identity and for understanding; it is an exploration of the connection between body and mind – the mind *in* the body and vice versa; it is a narrative of creation, procreation and recreation; it is a

journey of desire and will; it is an inescapable waltz toward annihilation coupled with a desperate effort to resist the pull and the “beat” toward death. Again, in a personal correspondence, Eshleman noted this of the chapbook: “my driving energy was to get my condition into language. To somehow surface, on my own, after the Blake immersion in Kyoto and while still working on my apprenticeship to poetry via translating Vallejo's *Poemas Humanos*.” A wonderful example of this immersion in the poem itself and one that also captures some of Eshleman's grotesque imagery described by Weinberger can be found in section 18:

I crouched naked on a hill in a blowing cold fire holding a caterpillar in my palms.
The wind charged. There was darkness as far as I could see. My arms were glass & I looked through them to where the caterpillar shriveled a blackened fetus.

On first looking into William Blake.

Engrossed *in* and *by* Blake and Vallejo, the narrator of the poem is a “conductor of the pit”⁸ – a captain of his own drunken boat who tries locating “the fool in creation” on one hand, and “a beautiful moth of starlight and breezes” on the other. The poem is also Whitman-esque in its sexual energy and in its unabashed use of contradiction. But, it is Whitman tinged with the kind of raw, unapologetic, often vulgar verses reminiscent more of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Arthur Rimbaud or Charles Baudelaire than poets of the Romantic Period (in America or Britain); the language is drunk with images of suffering and anger. The “storm cloud in the shape of a hornet,” though intended quite literally (well . . . as far as finding shapes and images in clouds can be literal), serves as a kind of ominous metaphor for the movement in this book: an angry, threatening storm cloud, buzzing with energy and possibility. However, this is not to suggest that the poet has

⁸ see footnote #3 above

abandoned hope; the “waltz” toward self-annihilation is resisted with everything language seems to offer, and it is meta-poetic in this way; i.e. it is poetry itself that saves the poet. The act of putting one’s condition into language is perhaps what Blake meant by the eternal and, it is perhaps, what Eshleman has in mind when he writes, “Sun in hand I entered death’s door.”