

Juniper Fuse

Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

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Clayton Eshleman is both Minotaur and shaman in this labyrinth of a book, the result of the author's 30-plus years of saturation in the Upper Paleolithic cave images of France. The reader is thus an apprentice summoned into the caves, into the very origins of human imagination, which Eshleman intuitively arose from the crisis of animal/human separation 10s of thousands of years ago.

The author of 23 books of prose, poetry, and translation—including a National Book Award-winning cotranslation of César Vallejo's poetry—Eshleman probes the caves for clues to creativity. He ecstatically conveys "the astonishing ancientness of the human creative impulse" and thereby emboldens any human seeking to create original work 30,000 years after the first Cro-Magnons began scratching rock and painting in the dark, illuminated only by burning wicks of juniper.

In Eshleman's recent collection of essays, *Companion Spider*, he quotes poet Robert Kelly in words that offer guidance on how to encounter *Juniper Fuse*:

There's a certain kind of person who will inevitably go to The Cantos or the Maximus Poems or some other ballbuster and make that his destiny for a year or two years ... he will have passed through a process which is not just a process of perception or critical judgment but a process of transformation.

And so spelunker beware: Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse* is a gorgeous, baffling, often frustrating initiation that, if taken seriously, will bring the apprentice to the end of his or her rope—in other words, the place where profound and unexpected transformations can occur.

Eshleman's Charles Olsen-inspired "saturation job" in cave images is part academic prose, part poetry, part personal essay, part translation of Cro-Magnon imagination into Eshleman's own idioms, and part art appreciation. He himself avoids the term "art," because today it "implies transcendent values while cutting itself off from utilitarian, magical, and occult activities." The book contains eight pages of glossy color photographs as well as numerous black-and-white photos and drawings.

After making *Juniper Fuse* my destiny for only two months, I can imagine extending the exploration into years without running out of triggers for transformation. The eight and a half pages of single-spaced bibliography alone could keep an apprentice focused and energized for decades. But more to the point, the author's willingness to explore his own dark sources of creativity inspires courage and faith to explore the labyrinth of one's own life. He presents the following overview, evoking Ariadne, who helped Theseus escape the labyrinth after he killed the Minotaur:

Every artist participates in Ariadne. The transformation of the "given" life to a "creative" one not only involves entering a dark or "inner" life, but generating as well a resistance substantial

enough to test oneself against and to shape the focus of one's work. Having experienced the bestowal of soul (which is the reality of Ariadne), one must liberate the experience in a creative product, must emerge with more than the claim that something "happened" while "inside."

Eshleman crawled through caves now closed to the public and emerged with creations such as "Notes on a Visit to Le Tuc d'Audoubert," a six-page collage of photos, line drawings, verse, and a hybrid of field notes and prose poetry. The following excerpt is an example of the passion that animates the entire book:

*at times I wanted to leave my feet behind, or to continue headless in the dark, my stomach desired prawn-like legs with grippers, my organs were in the way, something inside of me wanted to be an armored worm,
one feeler extending out its head,
I swear I sensed the disintegration of the backbone of my mother now
buried 12 years. ...*

Eshleman likewise crawls through his own personal memories in search of the "back wall" of his creativity. He reveals intimate crises, as when he nearly died in a car accident in France five years after he began asking for a vision of Paleolithic imagination. As he lay with a broken ankle waiting to be found, Eshleman remembered other passages in his life, such as 1958, the year he began to write poetry, and 1969, when a therapist lured him into a babylike trance. When the therapist pretended his finger was a nipple, an enraged Eshleman tried to bite it.

Raw stuff, and there's plenty more, especially in riffs on images of vulvae and phalluses in the caves. James Hillman warned Eshleman to be careful with the prehistoric archetypes, and the car accident confirmed the warning.

After my accident, I began to see prehistoric psychic activity as a swamplike churning in which creative and destructive forces were entwined in such a way that a person seeking to know them could hardly tell them apart. To enter the prehistoric cave of one's own mind then, to seek one's mind before birth, as it were, would be to enter a realm of darkness under the rule of possibly a single massive core.

Juniper Fuse creates its own category of literature—gamely categorized by Wesleyan as "Poetics/Psychology/Art History"—so one hesitates to apply ordinary aesthetic judgments to the components. But when it comes to the book's poems, it is hard not to question their relation to the extensive notes at the back of the book, many of which contain information about the writing of the poems.

Sometimes the notes bestow valuable insight into Eshleman's creative process, but other times they seem self-indulgent and bullheaded, like the poet at a reading who spends more time introducing his poems than simply letting them speak for themselves. For example, the note on "On Sunlit Garage Front" takes up more than a solid page of single-spaced text, while the poem itself is only seven lines long.

One of the strongest poems, "Upon Emerging From

Bernifal,” has no note at all. The poem contains this passage, which skillfully deploys internal rhyme and alliteration to recall how random marks on cave walls evolved into the first images of humans, a process of creation that is as mysterious today as it was millennia ago:

*I was to enter these hair lines and find my sway,
what kind of swarm I was, warm and wayward,
a moth man of sorts, a pupa inside a mammoth womb,
a moth womb man mite, lines groping lines ...*

One need not be an artist or a poet to gain transformation from this beautiful ballbuster of a book. Eshleman notes that the experiences that gave rise to the cave images “were certainly not limited to shamans or artists or even to adults.” He adds:

The wavering spectrum of groping crudeness to masterful finesse offers a foundational dream for universal creativity: Art can be made under almost any circumstances by anyone, anywhere. ■

REVIEWER: **Len Ederly** is a writer who lives in downtown Denver.