

ESHLEMAN, CLAYTON (1935-)

Poet, translator, essayist, magazine editor, Clayton Eshleman has expanded **postmodern** poetic vision in several directions: geographically (to include South-American, Martinican, and European poetries), temporally (to reach back to the Upper Paleolithic), and psychically, engaging the lower strata of the human body. An explorer of uncharted intellectual territories, he has translated or co-translated complete collections by such poets as Pablo Neruda, Aimé Césaire, César Vallejo, Antonin Artaud, and Vladimir Holan. In his 30 year investigation of Ice Age cave art, he has explored its relevance to the origins of image-making. He has also adopted Reichean therapy as a vehicle for the enhancement of vital and creative processes; and established animality, sexuality, the underworld, and the lower body, as sources of poetic vision.

Born in Indianapolis, in 1935, Eshleman earned his B.A. in philosophy (1958) and M.A.T. in creative writing (1961) at the University of Indiana. His first marriage (to Barbara Novak in 1961) ended in divorce; the second marriage (to Caryl Reiter in 1970) has grown into a loving creative companionship, resulting in literary collaborations and other joint discoveries. He has taught at various universities, both in the U.S. and internationally, first as a language instructor (University of Maryland, 1961-62; Kôbe, Japan, 1962-62), later as faculty member teaching poetry and creative writing (California Institute of the Arts, 1970-72; American College, Paris, 1973-74; University of California [San Diego, Riverside, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara], 1979-86). Between 1986 and 2003 he was Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, since 2003 Professor Emeritus. He and his wife have led tour groups to the caves of southwestern France (1981, 1983, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004); has been visiting scholar and poet-in-residence at various universities (among them, Brown University, University of Arizona, Cranbrook Writers Conference, Simon Fraser

University, Wichita State University, University of Maine at Orono). In 2004, he was invited to study and write about Hieronymus Bosch at the Rockefeller Study Center at Bellagio on Lake Como, Italy. Eshleman founded and edited two of the most significant 20th century poetry magazines: *Caterpillar* (1967-73) and *Sulfur* (1981-2000). Currently he lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Central to Eshleman's poetry is the effort—intellectual, emotional, personal, psychological, mythic, linguistic—to feel and push apart the limits that frame existence. These limits are responsive to human energy, the will to change and be changed, and Eshleman's whole poetry is the record of such efforts at transportation and transformation, metamorphosis and metaphor. "I feel that the supreme way a man indicates that he HAS expanded his consciousness from what he was given, to something much more, is by making art," he writes in the essay "The Sanjo Bridge". Here he defines art as both heightened perception ("a record of what a person has seen") and as an imperative for action ("Art wants to change the world"), insisting, in both cases, on the expansion of given limits: "[a]rt wants to destroy what all men feel are the limits of this world".

Blake, Vallejo, and Wilhelm Reich are among the earliest influences on his poetry. In the 1960s Eshleman came into contact with poets **Paul Blackburn, Robert Duncan, Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly**, and **Diane Wakoski**, sharing with them a willingness to take imaginative risks and linguistic leaps and a desire to renew American poetic vision through international innovative poetics, depth psychology, and archaic traditions. Unique to Eshleman's poetry was his response to the call of internal spaces—geographic (caves, tunnels, labyrinths), bodily (the uterus), psychic (dream)—in the hope of reaching, through a spiritual journey, back to primitive or archaic forms. Inspired by **deep image** as well as by **surrealism**, Eshleman turned to international figures of the symbolist, expressionist, and surrealist movements. Besides the foreign language poets mentioned above, he has also translated and

cotranslated writing by Arthur Rimbaud, Michel Deguy, Bernard Bador, Andre Breton, Sandor Csoóri, Ferenc Juhász, and Miklos Radnóti. Federico García Lorca's *Duende*, merging the spiritual and the magical and the lure of the Andalusian "deep song" (*cante jondo*) strengthened Eshleman's interest in the demonic, the mythic, and the macabre.

Eshleman and co-translator José Rubia Barcia won the National Book Award in 1979 for their translation of *The Complete Posthumous Poetry* of César Vallejo. In 2003 he received the Landon Translation Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Over the years, he has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Guggenheim Foundation.

In 1974 Eshleman first visited the cave of Lascaux in the French Dordogne, to see the famous cave wall imagery created during the last European Ice Age. Over several decades, he returned many times to southwestern France to study the caves where one can still see the truly tremendous breakthrough from no image of the world to an image, implying "a primordial underworld of unchanging perpetuity" (*Juniper Fuse* xii). *Juniper Fuse* (2004) is the *magnum opus* of Eshleman the poet and essayist who, having performed the "saturation job" recommended by **Charles Olson** to then **Black Mountain** student **Ed Dorn**, has discovered various levels of separation in human history: the human from the animal, the realistic from the "fantastic," the physical from the psychic, and the external from the internal. In addition, the cave drawings are seen as dramatizing a womb atmosphere, where a second, symbolic and imaginary, birth is made possible. *Juniper Fuse* draws upon such thinkers as Freud, Jung, Weston LaBarre, Géza Róheim, Sándor Ferenczi, Norman O. Brown, and James Hillman.

The whole Eshleman canon can be read as the record of his physical and spiritual journey, from middle-class Indiana to an artistic consciousness aware of its origins (Cro-Magnon image-making), its American and international artistic alliances (visionary-bardic

and rebel traditions, international avant-gardism), and, crossing through thresholds, its possible destinations (metamorphoses, psychic underworlds, sacramental sexual experiences). In Eliot Weinberger's words, "An Eshleman poem is unmistakable from the first glance. Image jams against image, not impressionistically but in service to a passionately argued line of reason, a line in which an idea, before completion, turns into another idea, and then another" (15). "To be alive as a poet is to be / *in conversation with one's eyes*," Eshleman writes ("Notes on a Visit to Le Tuc d'Audoubert"). Some of his best poems capture epiphanies of transformation and becoming, of the self merging with the other in the sexual act, or other reenactments of unification ("The Crocus Bud," "The Public Bath," "Diagonal," "The Baptism of Desire"). Others read like essays ("The Name Encanyoned River," "Hades in Manganese," "The Natal Demon"), and have, in Donald Wesling's words, "the ability to bring thought to bear on what's personal, to make connections between the perceptual or domestic and the historical" (3). In her Foreword to the poet's second collection of essays, *Companion Spider*, Adrienne Rich states: "Eshleman has gone more deeply into his art, its process and demands, than any modern American poet since Robert Duncan and Muriel Rukeyser" (ix).

Sulfur magazine is Eshleman's most substantial editorial accomplishment. In existence for nearly twenty years, it was to "engage multiple aspects of innovative contemporary poetry in the context of international modernism" (final issue [45/46], 6). It covered five main areas of attentions: each issue was international in scope (had new translations of contemporary foreign-language poets), published archival materials of (mostly radical avant-garde) American poets, introduced unknown young poets, gave commentaries and book reviews, and included resource materials taken from art, art criticism, archetypal psychology, anthropology, and political commentary. With such focuses connecting American and international radical thinking and creativity, *Sulfur* has emerged as one of the most significant magazines of late 20th century poetry.

Further Reading. Selected Primary Sources: Eshleman, Clayton, *Mexico & North* (Kyoto, privately-published, 1962); *Indiana* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow, 1969); *The Sanjo Bridge* (*Sparrow* 2 [November 1972], n.p.); *Coils* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow, 1973); *Hades in Manganese* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 1981) ; *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow, 1986); *Antiphonal Spring: Selected Prose 1962-1987* (ed. Caryl Eshleman, intro. Paul Christensen, McPherson & Co., Kingston, NY, 1989); *Under World Arrest* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1994); *From Scratch* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow, 1998); *Companion Spider* (foreword by Adrienne Rich, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 2002); *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination and the Construction of the Underworld* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003); *My Devotion* (Boston, MA: Black Sparrow, 2004).

Selected Secondary Sources: Weinberger, Eliot, "Introduction" (*The Name Encanyoned River*, 9-15); Christensen, Paul, *Minding the Underworld: Clayton Eshleman and Late Postmodernism* (Los Angeles, CA: Black Sparrow, 1991); "An Interview with Gyula Kodolanyi" (*Antiphonal Swing*, 183-198); Kenneth Warren, "Cro-Magnon Cognition" (*House Organ*, 46 [Spring 2004], Lakewood, Ohio).

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