

## *On the Need of Wisdom*

**The Invisible Pyramid**, by Loren Eiseley, *New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971. 156 pp., incl. bibliography and index. \$6.95.*

THE ESSENCES of beauty and of wisdom that permeate a writing cannot be conveyed by summarization. Yet our overcrowded days oblige us to demand epitomized book reviews; and, to assume that if there be large and insistent demand the market will provide the supply. Kirtley F. Mather, one of *The Key Reporter's* reviewers, does excellently, within the limitations of mini-reviewing, and for those who must have an encapsulated account of Professor Eiseley's latest—and greatest—book, Mr. Mather's will serve:

One of the most respected of contemporary humanist-scientists meditates—and dreams—about man's place in the universe, his emergence from the past, and his destiny in the space-age; enlivened by personal reminiscence, enriched by metaphor, illumined by wisdom, it is a thought-inspiring book, delightful and rewarding to read.

Even the best compressed description can but faintly indicate the richness and elegance of both Professor Eiseley's thinking and writing, nor can these qualities be adequately demonstrated (at least by this reviewer) by extended description. Thus it may be more rewarding to speculate on some of the considerations that led Professor Eiseley to create this particular work.

It is unlikely that in any other century of mankind has there been so much disillusion about the consequences of so much new knowledge and sophisticated technology. The more we (in the aggregate) know, the more we find we need to know; and the more knowledge we (in the aggregate) acquire, the more ignorant we (in-

dividually) become respecting the most important aspects of life and living. It is reluctantly but increasingly being recognized that, however each of the three concepts be defined, there are greater basic differences between knowledge on the one side and wisdom and understanding on the other than those who are especially partial to mere knowledge would prefer to admit. The eighteenth century *philosophes'* simplistic prescription of pure materialistic rationality for curing all of mankind's problems has proved a dangerous failure. Faculties not susceptible to quantitative measurement, such as wisdom, understanding and love (even, at times, a measure of what may seem to be irrationality), are as necessary as knowledge, rationality and technology to the amelioration of the problems that have forever plagued man and that increasingly exacerbate him as his number explosively increases within the confines of his earth-home.

Mere knowledge is as apt to fuel the fires of man's adverse conditions as it is to damp them. This is understood by the saving remnant in every age, but one of the tragedies of mankind is that in successive ages some of its most brilliant intellects airily, even scornfully, reject this age-old wisdom. They would impose upon all men measures for living based *only* upon a less than all-comprehensive empiricism and logic. Wherefore it is the task of the sages of every age to repeat, in a vocabulary and a rhetoric that may capture the contemporary attention, the lesson required for man's ever-recurring need of salvation—the forever true but never learned basic reality: man dies, but he does not live, by bread alone.

Despite the pretensions of mankind to rationality and despite the delusion of so many that they order their lives wholly according to rational principles, men are always addicted to wishful thinking. Nothing is more dangerous to progress (whatever may be the consensus about what constitutes "progress") than the conviction that progress is inevitable. It is the egregious

error of the scientifically oriented of every generation not only to believe but to act as if the cup of knowledge is already so well filled, or shortly will be, that it is only a matter of a further brief period of applying this knowledge by the experts before the perfection of mankind and of the human condition will be realized. So it has been for twenty-five hundred years, from the injunction of Parmenides, ". . . by no means let much-ried custom force you this way . . . rather, judge by reason the much-disputed proof which I expound . . ." to the recent prophecy of the retiring president of a prestigious scientific body that science now comprehends almost all the basic knowledge necessary for the better reconstitution of men and their circumstances. Happily, there are still those who believe that if scientists are to improve the human condition they dare not ignore the truly fundamental knowledge, that is, the *understanding and wisdom* that can only be discerned (however indistinctly and imprecisely) in the long, still obscure, cosmic record and man's own history and in the traces of his pre-history, so much of which is still a mystery to him, more of which will become clearer in future ages, but some of which will always remain impervious to man's probing and questing. The Noumenon but reluctantly yields up its secret to man. This is not the certainty that an anxious mankind craves, nor the quick easy way to "the better life for all" that he wishfully believes is possible (and that demagogues and some narrowly brilliant intellects promise him); but it is the *reality* of "the way."

These, however, are this reviewer's formulations and it would be presumptuous to impute them to Professor Eiseley. But implicitly and sometimes expressly *The Invisible Pyramid* rather clearly indicates that these considerations or others closely akin to them must have been present in the meditations that moved the author to shape as he did both the substance and form of this work. Professor Eiseley is superbly equipped in the way of an enormous erudi-

tion, as well as being a matchless weaver of poetic insights, to carry on the great and saving tradition of the remnant. In the hands of those of less breadth and depth of ability "the lessons of the past and their portent for the future" have been so poorly dealt with that such works tend to become discredited. *The Invisible Pyramid* reestablishes the genre to the great heights that the best writers and thinkers have commanded at irregularly recurring periods throughout history. Professor Eiseley's great humanity, sensitivity and humility, coupled with his gift of imaginative analogies and metaphors grounded both in contemporary science and in matters that are of the greatest current concern, add valuable dimensions to his work. His is not the strident voice of the prophet nor does he essay the role of a Socratic gadfly; rather, as observed by Mr. Mather, Professor Eiseley "meditates—and dreams . . ."

In the year 1971 we cannot get through a day without being reminded of our oriental brothers and the involvement of the West (and especially of the United States) with them. In the surfeit of vapid sloganeering, many of our people have uncritically rejected all of the principles and ways of Western Civilization. This is of no real help to the peoples of either West or East, however much a thorough restudy and reevaluation of our Western Civilization may be overdue. It may be that the concepts of our Western Civilization tend too much toward dichotomies, to an insistence that reality is and must be dealt with on the basis of more or less traditional absolutes—"either-or's," as contrasted with the eclecticism of oriental peoples. As we become better acquainted with their motivating viewpoints and beliefs it seems to many Westerners that a significant difference between them and us is that they tend to embrace and absorb metaphysical, ethical, cultural and materialistic systems and practices that, to us, are mutually exclusive, and they do so with apparent psychological benefit and with no intellectual or emotional trauma, a feat of which few Westerners are capable. The

nearest we have come toward duplicating effectively what the orientals "do naturally" has been to propose, in place of traditional "either-or's" that clearly aren't working very well with or for us now, various new hypotheses, some quite nebulous, for study, testing and discussion. Professor Eiseley is particularly imaginative and adept in this technique and *The Invisible Pyramid* is a masterpiece of this kind of intriguing invention.

Professor Eiseley is not dogmatic; but I am dogmatic in my admiration and appraisal of *The Invisible Pyramid* as a truly great book. Like most Scribner publications it is admirably produced, and its beauty is enhanced by seven stark but delicate woodcut illustrations by Walter Ferro.

Reviewed by DEAN TERRILL