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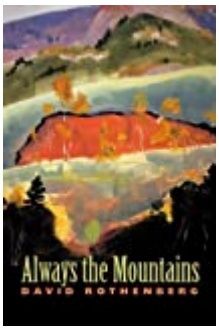

David Rothenberg. *Always the Mountains.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. ix + 261 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2454-8.

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The Seven-Eleven

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It is hard to characterize David Rothenberg's work in disciplinary terms, and I believe that is how he intends it. Rothenberg is an increasingly well-known environmentalist and music theorist. He is the coeditor of an interdisciplinary journal he founded–*Terra Nova* (formerly a quarterly, currently an annual). This journal merges work on nature with work on culture. It is an exciting concept and has been thriving over the past half-decade.

Besides being an editor, Rothenberg is a prolific writer. In the 1980s, he met and connected with the deep ecological philosopher Arne Naess. Since then, he has written or edited a number of books that combine nature, culture, and philosophy. In addition, as you might expect from a professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, he has often written on technology. Besides a book on technology–*Hand's End: Technology and the Limits of Nature*–he is also well known for his articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on the woes and potentialities of the internet for student learning.[1] He regularly writes for *Parabola*, *Whole Earth Review*, and other publications. Rothenberg is also a musician and has recorded some half-dozen CDs playing mostly his clarinet and improvising. A new CD also accompanies his recent book, *Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature*, which is on improvisation as an art form.[2] Finally, in *Always the Mountains*, Rothenberg shows he has tried his hand at poetry as well. In short, Rothenberg is a multifaceted academic and artist–someone in the tradition of Goethe, Thoreau, or Gary Snyder. Perhaps he is just a romantic renaissance man, if such a combination makes sense.

Rothenberg's most recent book is *Always the Mountains*, a compilation of essays, papers, and reviews he wrote mainly for non-academic publications. The compilation spans his work back to the 1980s, although most of the pieces were published in the 1990s. Thus the book provides a tacit retrospective on his career at mid-life. Rothenberg has added a couple of essays and revised the rest. Still, the collection is not connected by a central argument or even a single thematic. It is a collection one "flips through," in the casual and free style of Thoreau. The title, too, is retrospective. As a boy, Rothenberg was told by an older friend at a Vermont camp to sign his letters:

Always the mountains,

Dave

and he has kept this practice even to this day. You might say, then, that the book is a series of "letters" from Dave to you, signed in his characteristic way.

I believe the purpose of the book is to suggest how many sides there can be to environmental thought, once you open up environmentalism to art, music, and other genres. In the spirit of Val Plumwood's most recent foray into a holistic environmental culture, you might say Rothenberg explores an environmental way of life across these public essays.[3] That way of life involves images of stark eco-action–e.g., in Thoreau or Abbey–as well as ecological dimensions of otherwise un-Green things–e.g., sound in Cage, childlike paint in DeKooning, the "zone" in Tarkovsky's films. Accordingly, of the twenty-one sections of the book, one is a piece of more traditional philosophy, one a free-verse poem (with occasional internal rhymes), one an essay on a painting elephant (!), two art-attempting dialogues with great artists Rothenberg met, a couple on "managing" wild areas, some public invitations to read some of the greats in environmentalism (e.g., Thoreau, Abbey, Chief Seattle, Naess), and a number on themes relevant to environmental culture (e.g., information technology, the idea of sublime experience, cultural problems with suburban sprawl, non-violence…). Thinking just of the contents in his book, Rothenberg is bound to succeed with his purpose.

However, many of the essays are poorly written, cliched, and assume an audience in a way people might find offensive or annoying. I would urge Rothenberg, an obviously talented man, to slow down with his production and rediscover the density of life. Poetry comes from density. In what follows, I will engage Rothenberg through his own landscape, trying to twist the density a turn more in his literary world. By engaging with his work this way, I am being true to his wishes. Rothenberg does not want us to dryly respond to him, but to be friends with him and to respond in artful ways. I repeat, it would be a betrayal of his better intentions to do anything but respond to him in a concrete, poetic way. Thus, in evaluating his book for your own purposes, you should consider the form of response it elicits. This form may be one of the best things the book has to offer.

The 7-Eleven

The spiritual center of Rothenberg's book is the 7-Eleven, not as an object of desire but as a condition. In an essay on landforms and how we dwell in them, Rothenberg writes,

"Who wants to live next to a 7-Eleven? The local shop has evolved into the 7-Eleven and been stripped of its locality. We use the place all the time but we don't trust it. We only want it when we need it" (p. 133).

Rothenberg continues: the better question is, what kinds of services and shops should we want and zone together? Yet his interesting remarks are in the quote above. What hovers in the back of the 7-Eleven is capitalism. Both the question of where you *want* to live and the question of what you *want* to buy at the 7-Eleven are joined there. Moreover, the condition of a rootless, economic site fulfilling one's actions is a capitalistic one. Living in a place you don't trust but that efficiently caters to quick desires is the spiritual condition of our economy. Would you like a mega-Slurpee or a packet of chemical cupcakes? What is fast, cheap, and ephemerally satisfying? Ironically, Rothenberg's book could be caught up in this "zone." His could be a 7-Eleven of environmentalism–quick, glittering with brands of thought, and ephemerally satisfying. What do you want?

The quoted passage jumped out at me, because I felt that there Rothenberg was being true. The hundred pages leading up to the passage were concerned with one romantic character or idea after another, including American Zen, the sublime, deep ecology, Thoreau on Mt. Katahdin, Henry Bugbee and the snowflake on a hot stove, and authors I've already mentioned he addresses. All of these seem far from the reality of life as "we" live it (proof is that these chapters are not written as insider's guides). Rothenberg's voice becomes sentimental and vague during many of the chapters, as if to contain their unreality. What many of the chapters are about is real or at least critically edged, but not in short, chatty essays. Non-violence, for example, is taught by deeds, and your writing must have the intensity of staring at a fist to be itself a deed. But Rothenberg does not speak from outrage. Instead, he lays out the "spiritual goods" as if advertising them, and this is why the 7-Eleven rings true.

Come to this counter at a 7-Eleven. For a moment, things are real, including a real dismay at a violent and degrading economy. In his essay on Cage, Rothenberg makes much of Cage's *4'33"*, a piece of that duration consisting of silence. The piece recalls us to reality–the reality of sound. But Rothenberg's *4'33"* is the 7-Eleven. Along its counter, we can take account of the reality

of Rothenberg's environmentalism–alienated by a flirtatious economy but seeking a place.

Imagine you stepped back from the 7-Eleven counter while numbering out bills for your gas, and saw the world in which we exist. You walked across the oil-spotted concrete in the haze of fluorescent lights. This refrigerator room displays cheap, sugar goodies. When you joke with the red-smocked clerk, you deploy the place *against* itself and pocket some communication. Momentarily, then, you see what's missing: Use all this but don't trust it. All this–the earth and water that made the food and drink, the air filtered through the conditioner, pictures of tropical lands that litter the cigarette vacation-ads above the counter. For 7 seconds and 11 milliseconds, you paused above some fives and singles until the clerk joked you back into the seamless flow of the economy. I use the economy but can't trust it to bring me home. At any moment, I might be discarded –or someone abused … somewhere, somehow–for the fast score. The forests themselves topple into the ground so the cattle carved into burger can graze and "serve" people their packaged burritos–frozen, there, behind me.

Rothenberg's last essay is an unripened poem called "The Zone." He contextualizes it within both Chernobyl and Tarkovsky's movie *Stalker*, about a mysterious "zone" where an eco-disaster occurred. In Tarkovsky's movie, "the room" is at the center of the zone, a place where your heart will be disclosed and your deepest wish made true. At the edge of this room, the searchers of the zone kneel down in the detritus water and implore, rain cascading down through the split open roof: Can there be a world without violence? At their feet in the water-covered floor are fish, algae, soaked icons, and also weapons–defunct now and rusted. Yet the problem with the room is that if your heart holds an evil wish in it, that wish will come true. Hearts are impure, too.

The 7-Eleven counter does not seriously admit that hearts can be impure. After all, the fantasy of capitalism is that whatever you want is OK, as long as you pay for it, and paying for it is also OK, no matter what you want. Capitalism itself is a false "zone." "Come here all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest"–a vacation, boat, beautiful clothes, a car that goes "zoom," exploited labor and lands. Such a fantasy is immoral, for morality does not have a home in it. It is anti-ecological, for ecologies have limits for the forms of life that live in them. You can't simply do what you want in the natural world and certainly not if you should respect existing forms of life, all things considered.

The Wild Is the Other Side of the 7-Eleven

Rothenberg's book, like much literature in deep ecology and much U.S. eco-youth culture, is sick with romanticism, perpetual habit of escape. Romanticism is part of the pathology of a soul caught in the contradictions capitalism forms in us. Capitalism alienates us, and part of this alienation is the promotion of infantile fantasies of quick fixes, womb-like states, and final solutions masquerading as bliss. The wild is all this for Rothenberg and many of his heros. For instance, the category of the sublime is central to Rothenberg's cultural landscape. The second essay of the book is on the importance of sublime experience in the wild, and many of the book's later essays openly invoke the sublime, even if they do not evoke it. The sublime as Rothenberg sees it is the experience of absolute uncontrollability in human life. Sublime experience in nature frees nature from our narcissistic grip. We cannot control what is absolutely out of our control. Yet the problem with emphasizing the sublime is that it alienates us from the idea of a relationship with nature. Thrown back on our inability to control what awes us, we lose a middle way–to relate or fit in. Polarizing our stance toward nature, the sublime breeds the counter-desire for absolute fusion with–or even domination of–nature. Sublime experience is the other side of the coin of domination or fusion. In this way, its emotional universe is still infantile. We need to relate to mature.

The wild cannot solve the problem that creates it, because the romanticism of the wild is part of the problem, the infantile bulwark for perpetual alienation. For instance, the 7-Eleven is all that the wild is not. The yearning for the wild is the yearning to escape the 7-Eleven. When Rothenberg romanticizes the wild, his longing is inversely proportional to the dehumanization the 7-Eleven causes him. In this way, *both* the 7-Eleven and the wild are expressions of an anti-ecological world. Capitalism produces the wild as a category of experience and perception, and that production is anti-ecological, because it supports the logic of a world that aspires to the infantile fantasy of gobbling up whatever people want. In this light, you might be able to understand, then, why students so often enamored of the wild relate to the wild as the place where all their dreams come true and where they can do whatever they want. The wild is anti-ecological and capitalist, that's why.

Rothenberg's Good Question

The 7-Eleven passage quoted above links up the textual roots of many of the essays in Rothenberg's book. It also contains a tacit question that threads together

many of the book's sections. Is there a way of life that places love for the natural world within human flourishing? This question stays while romanticism wants to flee. It is environmental not from the wild but from human life. Human life is natural–we have a form and basic needs. We love, and while love is polymorphous, it is an essential need of humanity. When we love the natural world, we love a continuity and source of ourselves. When we fail to love the natural world, we fail the continuity and sources of ourselves. Rothenberg understands this in spite of the deep pockets of alienation forming his experience of the wild (n.b. in the manner of a formal cause). Human life itself "zones" us into the natural world, if we are to be healthy and if we are to love ourselves.

At the deepest part of the human heart, you should find an object of desire–a flourishing, human life. This thought is not romantic, but classical, dating at least to Aristotle. It was also Rousseau's thought, thanks to his Stoic inheritance, but romanticism capitalized on the more infantile reading of Rousseau. A flourishing, human life is open to interpretation in a seeming infinity of respects. Yet it is the kind of life that does better when at home in the world with reassuring and informative patterns of natural and human history. Even more, a human life at home in the world shows respect for other existing life forms, all things considered. There can be only a broken home if it is dominated by a spirit of uninhibited desire. In this way, human life must transform its capitalist heart in order to flourish. I believe Rothenberg points, in the manner of a tree lit up with symptomatic bird songs, at the need to become more healthily human.

Always the Mountains is a complicated book, even more so because it tries to be so breezy. The anxiety of Rothenberg's mix of styles and the directions he follows in order to do something to unwork our anti-ecological world raise questions beneath the surface of his writing. In this way, I think the book is worth reading for those intent on unfolding the evident passion of this environmentalist, but not without having to wean oneself of his words, too.

Notes

[1]. David Rothenberg, *Hand's End: Technology and the Limits of Nature* (University of California Press, 1993).

[2]. David Rothenberg, *Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature* (University of Georgia Press, 2002).

[3]. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Routledge, 2002).

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