

The Discursive Mode: Kenneth Rexroth, the California State Guide, and Nature Poetry in the 1930s.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Chiura Obata. CLOUDS, UPPER LYELL TRAIL, ALONG LYELL FORK, 1930. Color woodblock print. 11" x 15 3/4" - Courtesy of the Obata family. Throughout the 1920s the Japanese-born modernist painter Chiura Obata devoted his attention to the California landscape. During an extended camping trip to the High Sierras in 1927, he created more than fifty watercolor paintings and many sketches. He described the trip as transformative, as "the greatest harvest for my whole life and future in painting" (48). Like Rexroth's, Obata's sojourns in the Sierras dramatically affected his style, leading to formal experimentation as he adapted a

variety of Japanese painting techniques such as sumi to express his intense spiritual engagement with a “western” landscape. For more information, see Obata’s Yosemite (Yosemite National Park Association, 1993). *The Discursive Mode: Kenneth Rexroth, the California State Guide, and Nature Poetry in the 1930s* George Hart

Mostly, I suppose, it is the natural setting which has held me [in the San Francisco Bay Area]. Most of my recreation, much of my livelihood, most of my writing have all depended upon it. I am a skier and a mountaineer, and the highest mountains in the country, the finest rock climbing, and some of the best skiing are a day’s drive or less away. — Kenneth Rexroth, “Why I Live in San Francisco”

In *An Autobiographical Novel*, Kenneth Rexroth writes that after moving to California in 1927 his “poetry and philosophy of life became what it’s now fashionable to call ecological,” and, he goes on to explain, “I came to think of myself as a microcosm in a macrocosm, related to chipmunks and bears and pine trees and stars and nebulae and rocks and fossils, as part of an infinitely interrelated complex of being. This I have retained” (376-77). Rexroth began his career as a second generation modernist, participating in various aesthetic movements that flourished after World War I. By the mid-1920s, Rexroth, just in his twenties, considered himself a Cubist poet, deriving his aesthetics from the movement in painting. (Both he and his first wife, Andree, painted in this style.) The “ecological” change is marked by his abandonment of the fragmented, clipped Cubist syntax and imagery. The sociocultural context for this turn can be found in the writing Rexroth did for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and in the growing popularity of wilderness recreation in the first half of the last century. Throughout the 1930s, more detailed and particular representations of the nonhuman environment appeared in Rexroth’s poems, a direct result of his work on the California state guide, and the ideals and aesthetics inherent in wilderness recreation merged with his radical politics and modernist aesthetics. What’s more, Rexroth registered these changes by developing a new style—a “discursive mode”—that matched his incipient ecocentrism more precisely than his Cubist poetics.

Because of this unique confluence in Rexroth’s interests, the nature poems in his first collection, *In What Hour*, are central to nature poetry at a crucial transition in twentieth-century literary history.¹ WAL 37.1 Spring 2002

In the thirties, Rexroth, like many writers and artists, was involved in leftist politics and participated in many Communist Party activities.² By the middle of the decade, he distanced himself from the official activities of the Communist Party because of its increasingly restrictive aesthetic requirements for artists and writers and its nationalism.³ He took up activities with a more regional focus, such as labor organizing in San Francisco and writing for the WPA’s Federal Writers’ Project. The political upheaval at home and in Europe, along with the disintegration of his first marriage, led to extensive camping trips with his second wife, Marie. Rexroth’s biographer, Linda Hamalian, writes, “To escape...



Chiura Obata. *CLOUDS, UPPER LYELL TRAIL, ALONG LYELL FORK*, 1930. Color woodblock print. 11" x 15 3/4". Courtesy of the Obata family.



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