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**DWELLING IN AND DWELLING ON SEWERS: MICHAEL AARON
ROCKLAND'S SNOWSHOEING THROUGH SEWERS:
ADVENTURES IN NEW YORK CITY, NEW JERSEY, AND
PHILADELPHIA**

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Snowshoeing Through Sewers relates Michael Aaron Rockland's sometimes dangerous explorations of his highly urbanized dwelling place ("not where no one has been but where no one wishes to go," [6]) by canoe, by bicycle, or on foot.

This paper relies on ecocriticism to assess the relevance of Rockland's enterprise, which is linked to the famed American fascination for outdoor activities and also constitutes a parody of the "discovery" of America. It analyzes the initiatory aspects of the endeavor, which takes the author on an American odyssey that leads him to face his childhood self, the Americanness of his family and to probe the soundness of his humanistic beliefs. Drawing on the constant references to *Walden* that pepper the text, the last part eventually questions Rockland's ability to offer a stable ethic in the context of an environmental degradation he seems to be taking for granted.

Key words: *nature, environment, America, New York, New Jersey, Thoreau, non-fiction*

Rockland is a professor of American Studies at Rutgers University; *Snowshoeing Through Sewers: Adventures in New York City, New Jersey, and Philadelphia* (1994) relates his explorations of his dwelling place over a period of a "half dozen years [...], on weekends and during vacation periods" (7), "not where no one has been but where no one wishes to go" (6). He (dis)covers his highly urbanized habitat by canoe, kayak, bicycle, or on foot.

His book relates ten such adventures in three parts, each devoted to a geographical area alluded to in the title. His expeditions on the waterways require the help of a resourceful neighbor but the biking and hiking are carried out alone. He starts by canoeing all around Manhattan from Battery Park, then walks the 275 blocks of Broadway, canoes to Manhattan from his home in Central New Jersey, bikes along Route 1 ("perhaps the busiest highway in America" [62]) from Trenton (NJ) to the George Washington Bridge, paddles all along half-forgotten New Jersey canals, and walks across New Jersey westward from Philipsburg to

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Jersey City along the notorious Route 22 (aka "Blood Alley, the Psychiatrist's Delight, and Catch 22" [95]). He then repeats the same type of experience in and around Philadelphia.

Though his ten stories are nonfictional and Rockland does not seem to claim literary—or athletic status—he often draws parallels between his endeavors and those of Lewis and Clarke, Huckleberry Finn and, mostly, Thoreau. He tentatively calls his initiative "*human ecology*" (7) and vindicates it as his inalienable organic right: "My home is as much part of nature as any beaver's or wasp's" (7); "We say 'as the crow flies.' Don't we have the same rights as crows?" (98)

This paper aims to assess the relevance of Rockland's dual enterprise, whose physical side I slinked to the famed masculine American fascination for outdoor activities¹ and as such constitutes a parody of the "discovery" of America, while its written account is presented as an ironic, latter-day version of *Walden*. Thus it is necessary to start by focusing on Rockland's achievement as an American explorer in America before sketching the initiatory aspect of his journeys. The present study will then rough out the problematic aspects of Rockland's approach to failure which, according to the author makes the best stories, but which also raises key aesthetic issues.

1. An American explorer in America

Rockland and his friend Phil's eastern and mostly eastward expeditions compose an ironic counterpoint to Lewis and Clarke's and to American expansion as a whole. Their discoveries are mostly *rediscoveries* of a territory that has lost its mysteries through the neglect of its inhabitants and the destruction of its natural environment. With all its humor, Rockland's introduction sounds like an awakening:

Enough of escape! "Go west, young man" doesn't cut it for me anymore, nor, I suspect, for America. My country and I are no longer young, and the West no longer embodies our dreams. And half of us are women. "Go east, middle-aged America" might be a better slogan—not literally east but back into civilization, back into community. (7)

Snowshoeing Through Sewers is not only the account of the author's discovery of his surrounding habitat; it is also a didactic text meant to acquaint the reader with a wide array of information relative, among others, to history (the

¹ At the end of the nineteenth century "the outdoors movement clearly drew upon a traditional American distrust of the city [...]. Secondly, nature meant [...] virility. It represented that masculine hardiness and power that suddenly seemed an absolutely indispensable remedy for the artificiality and effeteness of late nineteenth-century life." (Higham 2008: 143)

two paddlers land "against the Market Street pier, the very place where Benjamin Franklin arrived for the first time in Philadelphia at the age of seventeen [165] and come across many "'George Washington Slept Here' signs" [45]), topography, geology, ("Two blocks from where I was sitting, at 93rd Street and Riverside Drive, a huge chrysoberyl crystal weighing ten pounds was found during a construction project. [...] There are also rare minerals in Manhattan. Under the West Side Highway lies a deposit of uranium so potent it has been known to activate a Geiger counter in a car passing far overhead" [33]), as well as sociology and anthropology. Part of the information gets gathered during the expeditions, while the rest is highly specialized and must either result from extensive background knowledge—probably bookish—or from specific research. For instance, after noting that "descending Manhattan, you pass through ethnic groups like an archeologist slicing through strata of civilizations" (29), Rockland learnedly states that "you also go over many hills, a reminder that the word Manhattan is derived from the Algonquin word meaning island of the hills" (29-30)—before explaining the whole erosion process of the area: "Originally the island was a series of mountains, but these were eroded during the ice ages by glaciers that covered Manhattan to the height of today's skyscrapers. Erosion continues, but now it's the buildings, streets and sidewalks that erode instead of the paved-over hills." (30)

That is how, paradoxically, the polluted/ing city happens to protect the island on which it is built, and whose primeval nature may still be detected by attentive walkers. Though it is presented as "a love letter to my much abused land," (7) *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* is no environmental pamphlet; Rockland focuses on nature as it is rather than as it was or should be. The reader is presented with various aspects of wild fauna and flora that manage to survive or even to thrive in an otherwise noxious environment. It is not always possible to distinguish between first-hand and erudite information, as is the case with the allusion to the ginkgo, "oldest known tree species, [that] flourishes in a gritty traffic island down the center of Upper Broadway. Virtually impervious to disease and pollution, the ginkgo has survived since the age of the dinosaurs." (31) By contrast, Rockland's truly personal anecdotes carry much more impressive weight:

The ailanthus, New York's chief weed tree, also thrives on the Broadway island, as well as in vacant lots all over the city [...] [it] is tough and grows fast. I know one that sprouted from a tar joint and, aided by the drip from an air conditioner two stories above, began to push a small building off its foundation before anyone knew it was there. (31-32)

As for New Jersey, Rockland readily acknowledges its poor environmental condition; it is indeed an "industrial nightmare" (119) and deserves being called "the Garbage State" (119). Yet he makes a point of showing that a few enclaves testify to an underlying beauty: "in Burlington, you get the feeling New Jersey might actually be the Garden state after all." (119). Walking along Route 22 ("the double deuce"), strewn with the carcasses of dead animals, is an apt medium for apprehending the State it crosses, for the duality doubly reflected in its name and nickname perfectly applies to "New Jersey, the most densely populated and toxic state, [with] the greatest deer population per square mile." (98) Likewise, New Jersey water is not all of the noxious type; a biker in the Pine Barrens wilderness will come across "many lovely streams [...] [which] bubble out of the sand with water so pure it's drinkable on the spot." (125)

2. An initiatory enterprise

Rockland's decision to embark on a series of expeditions in the sometimes most inhospitable parts of the extended area arises from his sudden decision, one day, to do what he had always "fantasized [:] stopping and running up the nearest hill—straight up." (3) Though already in his fifties,² the realization of his dream assumes childish characteristics that make his journey an unlikely initiatory odyssey: "I felt as if I possessed the landscape, as if I was once again king of the mountain." (4) Just like a kid left on his own to choose the food necessary to a short outing in the countryside and oblivious to his usual obsessive listing habits, Rockland randomly picks up mostly junk food: "Besides the inevitable jar of Gooberjelly and some cans of sardines and boxes of raisins, prunes and dried apricots, I had laid in a terrific supply of Hershey bars, sunflower seeds, Planters peanuts, pretzels, Mounds bars, and Cracker Jacks." (44) He also neglects to check the tides; as for sleeping in his office in the company of Ralph, it makes the two of them act "like a couple of teenagers at a slumber party." (48)

Rockland's adventures lead him to leave aside many of his grand principles—he prefers for instance sleeping in hotels rather than in his pup tent, going to the movies instead of spending the evening in junkyards, going to diners and McDonald's to staying in uncomfortable places and, occasionally, being towed by high speed boats to suffering on the waterways ("Coupla fakes. They say they're canoeing to Philadelphia, but me and the old lady's carried them five miles

² Rockland was born in 1935.

already.” [164]). Humor and irony notwithstanding,³ however, his expeditions do prove risky and sometimes truly dangerous. He crosses highly polluted industrial parks, paddles past “Fresh Kills, the largest garbage dump in the world” (52), and actually gets to risk his life several times: “I had entered the long curving tunnel under the railroad in Hillside, where there was only a curb six inches wide to walk on. In the darkness I inched sideways, my chest flat against the grimy stone wall, my arms outstretched” (106). He also gets to run across and to bike along very dangerous highways, and has missiles thrown at him by blood-thirsty youths when canoeing along the Assunpink.

The physical courage and the suffering required to accomplish his ventures lead him to destinations which sometimes bear symbolic significance. Some of them are endowed with mythical proportions (“The Assunpink was the River Styx and we were descending into Hades” [153]) and the frightening tunnel that follows the murderous encounter with the youths ends up assuming a womb-like quality before opening onto an enchanted setting: “The Assunpink on this side of the tunnel was in striking contrast to the nightmarish other side. The banks were gentle and clean, lined with cherry trees and flowers and ornate benches.” (156) Sometimes akin to a symbolic rebirth, such destinations put him in a position to reflect upon his condition as a grown up and as an American, as exemplifies his arrival at Ellis Island, where he gets to sneak in at night, and which symbolically brings him back as close as possible to his pre-American origins. Just like so many other immigrants, his grandfather was made to Americanize his name on the very same spot, thus sealing the fate of the then unborn Rockland as “a casualty of the melting pot.” (56) Previously, the very end of his hike down Broadway had left him physically hurt, from a sore foot and a fall on the sidewalk, trying to escape “a tall, very dark black man,” (38) whom he fantasized as a mugger. The realization of his mistake⁴ painfully discloses to himself his latent racism, despite “having once spent two days with Martin Luther King. [...] *That* really hurt.” (38)

³ At one point, the two men looking for the wild end up oaring Carnegie, “an artificial lake,” and get attacked by “a herd of Canada geese [...], hissing and giving off nasty looks [...] and one ran Phil and nipped him on the ass.” (45) The birds have now become sedentary and settle all year long in New Jersey; their attack symbolizes the—literally—biting state of a vanishing wildlife and sheds light on the pathetic side of any attempt at recovering the latter.

⁴ “instead of hitting me, the man asked, in what sounded like a Jamaican accent, ‘You all right now? That was a nasty fall.’ He helped me to my feet. [...] ‘I always keep a Band-Aid in my wallet,’ the man said, proceeding to peel the Band-Aid on, stooping, apply it to my knee.” (38)

3. The question of failure

Rockland's mock-heroic initiation does not lead to any notable introspective streak; his expeditions are also an act of bravado in the face of his colleagues' narrow-mindedness:

I also get a hard time at work. The professors at the university where I teach think I'm not sufficiently scholarly. [...]

If Henry David Thoreau appeared today and applied for a position at my university, *Walden* prominently listed in his curriculum vitae, he'd be turned down—seen as a ne'er-do-well camper and hiker, not sufficiently scholarly.
(16)

Identifying with Thoreau as an outsider misunderstood by his contemporaries endows Rockland with an intellectual aura. Humor somewhat defuses the hubris, but the scorned academic's retreat into the wilderness still denotes an escape from his professional realities. His attitude may be viewed as characteristically American; Kolodny considers that "at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life" (Kolodny 1975: 6). Rockland's positive motivation is to be taken in that context; his empathy with his country emphasizes the ambivalence of his own reaction: "America had always gone with the flow, taken the easiest path, avoided facing its problems. Maybe Phil and I, paddling against the current and tide, represented a new way of looking at the country." (52)

When taking stock of his enterprise, Rockland views it as a necessary reaction to the nation's poor environmental and intellectual states; his paradoxical direction is mostly a matter of provocation:

I found myself thinking of Henry David Thoreau and wondering what he would have thought of the Philadelphia water adventure and of the other adventures as well. Thoreau built his cabin on Walden Pond to get out of town, while in all my adventures I had striven to get into town. Like other Americans I have always revered Thoreau's isolated cabin of a century and a half ago. But what, Henry, [...] have you done for us lately? (169)

The very first sentence of Rockland's introduction makes it clear that, subconsciously, writing was always foremost in his approach: "Although I didn't know it at the time, the idea for his book came to me years ago at a place in New

Jersey just off Interstate 287.” (3) *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* is his ultimate achievement and should be evaluated as such, bearing in mind Thoreau’s groundbreaking influence in nature writing.

The nonfictional nature of his book greatly limits its poetic dimension; however, it does not preclude any aesthetic consideration. Although “in the late twentieth century, a weed-and trash-filled city lot or even a hillside above an interstate may be a better place than the wilderness to contemplate one’s relationship to nature,” (6) Rockland chooses the areas he explores according to personal aesthetics: “a virgin landscape can only be pretty; beauty requires some artful intrusion of human works into the landscape. Walden is just a pond; Walden with Thoreau’s cabin on it charms the soul.” (149)

The author presents biotic environments he has carefully selected for their communal significance (“It is the archeological feeling of places where people have been and are no more that haunts.” [78]), deliberately eschewing the transcendental questions linked with the writing of the self. As a consequence, his book reads like an entertaining series of adventures which hardly convey the sense of having made a point. Given his avowed subversive mission, Rockland’s relation of his participation in a raft race on the Delaware (pp. 108-118) proves irrelevant and rather self-indulgent. The anecdotal event undermines the public relevance of the whole work. In that respect it should be noted that Rockland readily admits that during the expeditions hardly anyone shows any interest in his endeavor—not even his wife and kids.⁵

Rockland’s main conceptual basis is that a much slower pace gives access to another dimension, enabling the traveler to notice what is around and that he otherwise never gets to apprehend: “Seeing the countryside from behind an automobile windshield is like watching television: you’re part of the audience. On a bike, you’re a key actor of the show.” (121) The biker fleetingly alludes to a possible mystic interpretation of this attitude, before dismissing it offhandedly:

On Route 1, I pedaled in a state of grace. It was almost a religious thing.
Of course, this could all be a lot of baloney. (77)

Gatta, among others, contends that this attitude is a logical consequence of the contemporary predicament, for “humanity’s ability to imagine anything numinous in nature may be severely—perhaps even fatally—impaired by

⁵ After noticing how uninterested a waitress was when he tried to tell her about his water expedition, Rockland concluded that “women didn’t care one hoot whether I caught passes or canoed around Manhattan.” (21) Likewise, one of his kids even refuses to join him in New Jersey: “What did it mean that he preferred to watch programs about dysfunctional families than to camp out with his father?” (102)

environmental degradation." (Gatta 2004: 246) Be that as it may, Rockland does not point to any reliable ethic likely to effectively "paddle" against the deadly environmental current— a task which, according to Kolodny, a famed school of American *fiction* should be able to fulfill: "Twentieth century pastoral *must* offer us some means of understanding and altering the disastrous attitudes toward the physical setting that we have inherited from our national past." (Kolodny 137)

Devoid of overt militant discourse, *Snowshoeing* celebrates the individual's irreducible capacity to remain an adventurer, even within a natural environment degraded to the point of disappearance. Because it is not a straightforward indictment of land abuse, it presents a major ideological difference with Thoreau, who

engages in cultural criticism [and] is seen as a godhead in the environmental movement today precisely because he was one of the earliest nature writers to criticize the profligate exploitation of natural resources and to call on the government to preserve nature and on landowners to engage in more ethical (as opposed to economic) land-use practices." (Scheese, 24)

4. Conclusion

Unlike *Walden*, *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* does not articulate any definite assessment of man's place in his environment; the latter is merely taken for granted. As for *The Great Gatsby's* valley of ashes (alluded to on page 135), it was laden with symbolic significance and gave concrete substance to modern man's spiritual void. That was achieved through a moral framework backed by a truly poetic vision of a paradoxical age that Fitzgerald felt he belonged to, but whose pitfalls his novel made blatant. Such ethic is absent in *Snowshoeing Through Sewers*, which makes up the *Bildung* of a middle aged man who remains fundamentally the same at the end of his initiatory journey, neither appalled at the destruction of his natural surroundings nor fascinated by the aesthetic quality of that apocalyptic spectacle.

Rockland's paddling the dangerous waters demonstrates the vanity of physically "going against the tide," which hardly comes as a surprise. If one wishes to extend the environmental metaphor, the two tides may be identified as the protection of the habitat on the one hand and its excessive exploitation on the other. Rockland's adventures shed entertaining light on dwelling in his uninhabitable surroundings; in his writing as in his paddling, however, he never really bothers to determine which tide he is about to ride. Since there is no such thing as totally uncommitted writing, *Snowshoeing Through Sewers* may prove

somewhat frustrating, for lack of a clear stance on the strictly human origin of the corruption in his "toxic Garden of Eden" (61).⁶

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Apstrakt

POGLED NA KNJIGU *SNOWSHOEING THROUGH SEWERS: ADVENTURES IN NEW YORK CITY, NEW JERSEY, AND PHILADELPHIA* MAJKLA ARONA ROKLANDA

Ovaj rad se oslanja na ekokritiku pomoću koje se procenjuje relevantnost Roklandovog poduhvata, koji je povezan sa čuvenom fasciniranošću Amerikanaca aktivnostima na otvorenom, a istovremeno i parodira „otkriće“ Amerike. Rokland kreće na odiseju po Americi, koja ga tera da se suoči sa sopstvenom ličnošću iz detinjstva, „amerikanizmom“ svoje porodice i da stavi na probu svoja humanistička uverenja. Oslanjajući se na Toroov *Volden*, koji provejava tekstem, Roklandova etičnost stavljena je na probu u kontekstu propadanja životne sredine.

Ključne reči: *priroda, životna sredina, Amerika, Njujork, Nju Džersi, Toro, dokumentarna literature*

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⁶ In *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike*, Rockland relates his thorough exploration of another New Jersey landmark along comparable stylistic and ethical lines.