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**Possible Mountains and Rivers:
The Zen Realism of Kim Stanley
Robinson's Three Californias**

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ABSTRACT: While Buddhist sensibilities pervade all of Kim Stanley Robinson's fiction, their most aesthetically consistent development can be found in his first major achievement, the three novels depicting alternative futures for southern California: *The Wild Shore*, *The Gold Coast*, and *Pacific Edge*. Zen realism is quite rare in science fiction, since the genre's most characteristic topoi are alien to Zen's insistence on suchness. That is why Robinson's vision is so distinctive. Each novel in its own way meshes science fiction and the aesthetic values of Zen: in narrative protocols, in linguistic style, and in the relationship between reader and text.

While Buddhist sensibilities pervade all of Kim Stanley Robinson's fiction, their most aesthetically consistent development can be found in his first major achievement, the three novels depicting alternative futures for southern California: *The Wild Shore*, *The Gold Coast*, and *Pacific Edge*—now compiled as the Three Californias trilogy. In them, Robinson applies notions drawn from the American strain of Zen Buddhism, from modern Western literary realism, and from near-future science fiction to create a distinctive voice and vision that will be evident in all his later works. By imagining possible histories of the future grounded in a single geographical location, Robinson engages both realism's insistence on empirical social facts and Zen's traditional resistance to historical consciousness. Through science-fictional alternative histories of the future, Robinson models a distinctive consilience of Buddhist and dialectical-historicist perspectives.

American Zen art is based on certain conceptions of experience derived mainly from two sources: the writings of Zen teacher D. T. Suzuki, who was profoundly influenced by American Transcendentalists during his long stay in the United States as young man,¹ and the poet Gary Snyder, who adapted ideas of the Rinzai tradition of Zen to the environmentalism and Native American cultures of the Pacific Northwest. Suzuki was and Snyder remains today active mainly in California; they helped to shape the distinctively Californian ecological movement from which many currents of the global counterculture have emerged.

The core concepts of Zen representation are best captured in a well-known saying attributed to the Tang dynasty master Qingyuan: "Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters."² Or, as it is better known: "First there is a mountain. Then there is no mountain. Then there is."

For Zen practitioners, experience appears first simply as unproblematic concrete reality. Through meditation on the essential interdependence of phenomena, practitioners gradually understand that the objects and moments of experience have no intrinsic existence. They let go of their deep investment in the need to see phenomena as self-subsistent, especially the experience of an integral independent self. Finally, as they return to everyday consciousness with clarified awareness, meditators understand that the world is just as it appears, minus the illusion of self-sustaining existence. In Zen art, concrete events are depicted as if they were naively, naturally available, presented without any need for justification or explanation:

I've never bothered about getting ahead
 But just gone leisurely along
 Letting things take their way
 In my bag are three measures of rice
 A bundle of firewood sits by the hearth

1. George J. Leonard, "D. T. Suzuki and the Creation of Japanese American Zen," in *The Asian Pacific American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*, ed. George J. Leonard (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 335–346.

2. Qingyuan, qtd. in Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (1957; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 126.

Who cares about delusion and enlightenment?
 What use is there in fame and fortune?
 In my hut, I listen to the evening rain
 And stretch my legs without a care in the world.³

The represented experiences have, however, been transmuted through an invisible process of release. Their “sentimental” perception (to use Friedrich Schiller’s term), in which experience is made subservient to self-reflexive doubt, conceptualization, and explanation, has been dissolved and its naive substance has been “emptied.” When these objects and events reenter the world of Zen discourse they appear to be as they were before, but they are no longer external objects of perception and contemplation—they are instances of interdependence. This is the process of experiencing *tathata*, usually translated as “suchness” or “thusness.” In its most prosaic expression, awareness of suchness is awareness of “it is what it is,” unclouded by the attachments, aversions, and ignorance of sentimental thinking. It is closely linked to notions of “emptiness” (*sunyata* in Sanskrit) and of “ordinariness” (*wu shi* in Chinese).⁴

For Zen in particular, among Buddhist practices the interconnectedness of all things manifests itself paradoxically, as a recognition that each aspect of reality condenses all others in its concreteness, embodying the principle that every particular is pregnant with the immanent fullness of Buddha-nature. This insight privileges ordinary, undramatic, unexaggerated experience. As an aesthetic, Zen mistrusts naive, sentimental, and meta sensibilities: the naive because it is asleep, the sentimental because it is fraught with imaginary compensations generated by desires, and the meta because it de-natures the world by focusing on the higher-level formalizations of discursive reason. Interdependence naturally implicates the utterance of its own concept, and so Zen art implicates itself in its own deconstructions.⁵

3. Taigu Ryōkan, *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryōkan—Poems, Letters, and Other Writings*, trans. Ryūichi Abé and Peter Haskel (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), p. 196.

4. On the connection between *tathata* and *sunyata*, see D. T. Suzuki, *Studies in Zen* (New York: Dell, 1955), pp. 140–142. For a more topical discussion, see John Clark, “On Being None with Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 19:4 (2008): 6–29.

5. This choice of words is not casual. Many contemporary scholars have noted the similarities between Mahayana Buddhist teaching and the practices of deconstruction. See Youxuan Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Toward a Comparativist Semiotics* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001); David Loy, *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Christianity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); and Jin Y. Park, *Buddhism and Deconstructions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

Zen Realism and Science Fiction

Zen style values simplicity, ordinariness, naturalness, clarity, and accessibility—but also paralogic, since overemphasis on logical chains (including linear cause and effect) substitutes habit and conceptualization for experience. Zen style eschews hyperbolic symbolism, narrative secretiveness, esoteric figuration, epic collisions, and inklings of mysterious powers. Profoundly influenced by Taoism and Japanese nature worship, both of which view nature and place as access points of primal immanence, Zen style rigorously emphasizes natural beauty and the deep link of awareness to a specific locality in which it is embedded.⁶ Since illusions of self-subsistence infuse normal perceptions of reality, even the most everyday perceptions are fraught with unconscious fictions. In Zen, the naive real is revealed to be fictitious paradoxically and necessarily through artifice and language. Parable and koan are the main vehicles for the communication of Zen wisdom; fiction and suchness are inextricably entwined.

In some respects, these values overlap with those of modern Western literary realism. In “mundane” realistic fiction (to use Samuel Delany’s phrase),⁷ writers strive to create the sense that the depicted world is familiar enough in its objects and human relationships that contemporary bourgeois readers can imagine themselves actually inhabiting it. This sense of familiarity requires that there be no fantastic or hyperbolic elements. The reader should also be forced to recognize powerful shaping relationships, ideas, and institutions of which she/he might be unaware in daily life. In other words, there is the negative enlightenment of stripping away the illusions of imaginary relations, and the positive enlightenment of perceiving real relationships that were previously invisible. Both of these vectors are potentially critical ones, which is why realism is intimately associated with critical consciousness. Because social relationships inherently involve power relations, realism is a political style, even when only tacitly so. Readers and protagonists of realistic narratives behave like Odysseus navigating the obstacles and attractions of the world. In realistic fiction, however, these are forces that can be recognized in readers’ actual experience; realism infuses actual relationships with the mythic force that it displaces from imaginary ones.

6. Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays by Gary Snyder* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 25–47.

7. Samuel R. Delany, “Generic Protocols: Science Fiction and Mundane,” in *The Technological Imagination*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), pp. 175–193.

As the notion of a modern *Odyssey* suggests, one of the vexed problems of Western critical realistic fiction is its reliance on inherited ethical-mythic structures underlying the concrete details of quotidian existence. While the details of the fictive world may be empirically recognizable, they often act as scaffolding for a base story that is “habitable” only in the sense that it is perpetuated by the culture’s institutions of ideology, foremost among them literature and religion. Realist writers have often turned to irony to cope with this quintessentially sentimental problem, but even in the most sarcastic treatment, the nonrealist story-myth remains present as a structuring trace.

Science fiction raises questions about fictive realism in particularly interesting ways. Delany has famously opposed science fiction to what he calls mundane fiction, by which he means fiction that is literally earth-bound in contrast with science fiction’s imaginative expansiveness into physical outer space and radical philosophical speculation. Delany’s term of art also implies banality, the routines of convention-bound social life. And indeed, science fiction’s romantic mainstream emphasizes thrilling novums, exotic adventures, and the sense of sublime and grotesque wonder that place it in the tradition of both right- and left-wing bohemian critiques of bourgeois ordinariness. For Delany, science fiction’s desired horizon is a kind of avant-gardism: readers are expected to construct new imaginary worlds by the decoding of the extraordinary language of science-fiction texts.⁸ It complicates matters, however, that science fiction has long relied on quasi-realistic narrative procedures. By and large, science-fiction writers work through recognizable cause-and-effect relationships to create the realistic illusion that a contemporary reader could dwell in their futures or alternative time-spaces with few discursive changes, at least initially. (Delany is, of course, a prominent exception to this rule.) No matter how bizarre the fantastic objects of the tale, science fiction has traditionally refrained from tinkering with the conventions of realistic storytelling unless and until new diegetic epistemic conditions are established (after which, otherwise avant-garde tools might be used to signify an even newer reality).

Most of the critical discussions regarding science fiction’s realism have revolved around the question of scientific plausibility—namely, is the techno-science depicted in the tale realistic or mythic/magical?—rather than the plausibility of social and personal experiences. Because the techno-scientific imaginary plays such a fore-

8. Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977; reprint, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), pp. 1–16.

grounded role, other aspects of experience that interest mundane writers are downplayed in science fiction. Nonetheless, readers often distinguish kinds of science fiction by the kinds of experience they accentuate through realistic means. The two most influential sources of the modern genre—Jules Verne and H. G. Wells—both conceived of their fiction as a speculative form of realism: for Verne, of plausible extrapolation from actual techno-science; for Wells, of the plausible effect of powerful novums on familiar societies. Science fiction set in the far future or a drastically altered world does not gain from realistic protocols; if the world has undergone truly enormous transformations, then importing the plausibility criteria of realistic fiction tends to produce banality. Near future science fiction, by contrast, often demands such realistic protocols, since the movement to the future from the present is marked by relatively slight changes from the audience's known conditions. The experimental school of "Mundane Science Fiction" provocatively proposed that these be binding requirements for science fiction.⁹ The Mundanes' insistence on building only worlds that meet the criteria of scientific plausibility in our own times was also, by default, a call for science fiction that develops areas of experience that much science fiction ignores—the ordinary experiences closely resembling those of its putative readers. Certain kinds of science fiction seem to demand such careful naturalistic representation. The nuclear-catastrophe genre (in works like *The Day After*, *Threads*, *The War Game*, *Testament*, *Fail Safe*), for example, places a high premium on careful representation of habitable everyday behavior to accentuate the horror of the destruction of all the stable sources of social value.

Zen realism is quite rare in science fiction, since the genre's most characteristic topoi are alien to Zen's insistence on suchness. After all, how can real experience be seen as the case, when the given reality is intentionally and obviously not the case? This is why Robinson's vision in the *Three Californias* is so distinctive and original. The trilogy seems to operate in exactly the opposite manner to Delany's conception of science fiction. New words are held to a minimum, novums are prosaically plausible, settings are only mildly displaced from the present. Instead of travel to new worlds and bodies, it is the familiar world and familiar habits that are foregrounded; instead of sublime and grotesque wonders, the novels emphasize stable

9. The intentionally ephemeral "Mundane Manifesto" has largely disappeared from the internet, but its main ideas are provided in a Wikipedia entry of it. July 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mundane_science_fiction.

beauties and measured forms. Each novel in its own way meshes science fiction and the aesthetic values of Zen: in narrative protocols, in linguistic style, and in the relationship between reader and text.

Zen, History, and Alternative Futures

The central role of suchness in Zen has a corollary in its emphasis on sudden enlightenment, the experience of *satori*. The suddenness of the experience is a guarantee that true awareness of *tathata* comes not from conceptual knowledge or ratiocination, which Zen treats as illusion-machines obstructing true understanding. This aspect of Zen became the most important selling point of the practice for Suzuki.¹⁰ While more traditional East Asian practitioners have cultivated reverence for the inner history of the sect represented in hagiographic narratives about the transmission of doctrine, American Zen has treated these traditions as if they too were part of the web of distractions from enlightenment in the here and now.¹¹ Indeed, it is hard to deny that Zen is inherently anti-historical. As Steven Heine writes: "Zen emphasizes the spontaneity and creativity of a transhistorical, holistic present moment which encompasses the historical continuity of past and future in terms of an ever-renewable cyclical-ity and reversibility of time."¹² In the words of contemporary Japanese Zen philosopher Keiji Nishitani, "[h]istoricity is able to realize itself radically only on the standpoint of *sunyata* [emptiness]. . . . Each individual moment of unending time possesses the very same solemnity that is thought in Christianity to be possessed by the special moments of creation, fall, redemption, and second coming."¹³ Material history in this framework is another version of the web of limited causality that substitutes attachment to illusory self-subsistence for the sense of interdependence that can only be recognized in a time-evaporating moment of awareness, the "eternal now." In this framework, history is a logocentric fiction created to legitimate collective human egocentrism; it offers an image of a world that

10. See D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 97–127.

11. Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 104–118.

12. Steven Heine, "History, Transhistory, and Narrative History: A Postmodern View of Nishitani's Philosophy of Zen," *Philosophy East and West* 44:2 (1994): 251–278, quote on p. 251.

13. Nishitani, qtd. in James Mark Shields, *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 129–130.

is responsive to humanly instigated material transformations, or at the very least one in which the present is felt to be merely a phase-point in the passage from the past to a meaningful future.¹⁴

The popularity of such a radical ahistoricism in an American context may appear somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it is surprising that such a mystical denial of history should have taken root in a culture so committed to its mythology of historical exceptionalism, a localized, secularized form of Christian providentialism; on the other, critical resistance to this very American exceptionalism has often taken the form not of reducing America to one nation among equals, but an inverted millenarianism that denies the mythology of nation and progress tout court. Because of America's intimate and dramatic relationship with nature on the frontier, Americans putatively have access to experiences of primal immanence that other cultures bound up with their self-involved histories no longer have.¹⁵

Snyder, American Zen's most prominent exponent, espouses just such a paradoxical anti-historicism. In his poetry and essays, he constructs a story of North America that demythologizes the ideology of industrial progress that has driven American modernization. Snyder replaces it with another, more salutary myth: of a fall out of a time when Native Americans were fully embedded in wild nature. The wildness of the world cannot be entirely excised from human experience, and in Snyder's framework, the cyclicity of myth is entirely appropriate for an eco-historical vision. For him, the ceaseless subordination of nature to human social-technological dominance on which the modernization project relies is unsustainable. As for most Zen practitioners, natural processes are the only lasting models for human ethics and social life.¹⁶

At the same time, Snyder also urges active and committed participation in the modern world, both as a form of Buddhist ethical practice and as a recognition that the suchness of this moment involves historical changes. As in Zen meditation, he argues, one gradually understands that the things of the world are as they are, but the illusions of self-centeredness and ethnocentrism are peeled away. For Snyder, ecology is the intellectual expression of awareness of interdependence; human social history is subsumed by natural

14. On Zen's ahistoricism and historicist thinking, see Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (above, n. 11).

15. Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Boston: Belknap Press, 1974).

16. Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (above, n. 6), and *Back on the Fire* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007).

history, which reveals the dynamic mutability within the overarching stability of the natural order, and by myth, the narrative articulation of this process.¹⁷

In the Three Californias trilogy, Robinson challenges this subordination of history in an original way, by combining an anarcho-Marxist-inflected sense of history as the field of human self-construction with Zen's vision of unlimited interdependence with nature, ordinariness, and universal compassion. In both anarcho-Marxism and Zen, there is a fundamental tension between a ceaseless dynamic of becoming and a moment of encompassing fullness at the "center" of time. For anarchists and Marxists, this tension is between the historical dialectic and utopia; for Zen practitioners, it is between ceaseless change and "the home ground of the present."¹⁸ Robinson attempts a synthesis of these two radically different, and yet similarly paradoxical, conceptualizations of human freedom that intersected in the countercultural ecological movements of California in the decades following the 1950s.

The Fictions

Each novel of the trilogy tells a different version of the future of southern California's Orange County. In *The Wild Shore*, historical development has been disrupted by a massive neutron-bomb attack on the United States, after which a UN-mandated quarantine is imposed to prevent the territory from reconsolidating as a nation. Japan has been entrusted with enforcing a naval embargo of the California coast and employs satellite-based laser beams to destroy periodically rebuilt railroad tracks that might connect the isolated valley communities to one another. Due to dramatic climate shifts, the region's ecology has been transformed from a semi-desert to a lush forest.

The Gold Coast depicts a barely displaced extrapolation of the Reagan-era socioeconomic trends in southern California. Most of the region has undergone hyper-development, freeways are built in complex stacks, and only the rich have access to open, undeveloped land. The local economy depends on defense industries and drug trafficking.

In *Pacific Edge*, a global revolution has produced laws severely limiting the growth and influence of corporations. Localities establish their own codes and customs to reclaim previously exploited land

17. Gary Snyder, "The Etiquette of Freedom," in *The Practice of the Wild* (above, n. 6), pp. 3–24.

18. Nishitani, qtd. in Heine, "History, Transhistory, and Narrative History" (above, n. 12), p. 256.

and to manage natural systems like water with rational, democratic trade and governance. Utopian social arrangements are in place: a ceiling has been placed on income and development; work and politics are based on face-to-face relationships; and daily life revolves around mundane, unheroic activities like zoning meetings and community softball.

Each novel varies the classical coming-of-age topos. An innocent young male protagonist deeply and somewhat complacently embedded in his locality and community of friends is drawn into a struggle to protect, or to transform, his home in the face of historical changes. Each novel varies this base-tale with a distinctive narrative pattern that subtly integrates voice, action, and setting with the different visions. Each novel begins with a group of friends digging into the earth to disinter the history buried below. In *The Wild Shore*, it is a matter of grave-robbing in a cemetery to salvage the silver handles from the caskets of a dead American civilization; in *The Gold Coast*, it is a lark to find artifacts from a middle school paved over by a fast-food parking lot; in *Pacific Edge*, it is a community-volunteer work-detail breaking up an obsolete freeway. The character of Tom Barnard figures in each novel as an elder who preserves the memory of the pre-dispersed past. In *The Wild Shore*, he is the village's wise man, teacher, and lore-teller, the most respected voice of his community; in *The Gold Coast*, he declines nearly forgotten in a sterile old-age home; in *Pacific Edge*, he is one of the founders of the utopian world, gradually coaxed back from personal grief to a life of action and commitment. Each novel also involves a "portrait of the artist as a young man," the maturation of a writer who must convey the story of his community truthfully against the myths, amnesia, and repressive ideology of his society. These true stories are also, paradoxically and necessarily, all metafictional texts that call attention to the fictionality of the otherwise compellingly realistic novels, as well as to the provisional, fictive character of readers' understanding of their present.

All three novels' diegetic writers compose texts in which the novels themselves are obliquely embedded. Henry Fletcher, the first-person narrator of *The Wild Shore*, writes a memoir that is also the novel that one is reading. Jim McPherson, the main character of *The Gold Coast*, discovers his vocation as a historian of Orange County and the author of historical contextualizations interspersed throughout the novel. In *Pacific Edge*, the recounting of central protagonist Kevin Clayborn's story is paralleled by the ordeals of Tom Barnard—Kevin's grandfather in the novel—as a young man trying to imagine, and then to write, a utopian novel as an act of po-

litical resistance in a dystopian world. Diegetically, the protagonists in all the novels are disconnected from their fathers (Henry's father is feeble presence; the ineffectual poet Jim is at loggerheads with his weapons-engineer father; and Kevin's parents have spent many years engineering a satellite space station, and may never return to earth). They all fall for the wrong girl (wrong in different ways in each tale); they all experience a romantic tryst on a rope swing in a remote ravine known in all three books as "Swing Canyon"; and all include symbolically significant sports (swimming and body surfing in *The Wild Shore*; surfing and mountain hiking in *The Gold Coast*; and softball and glider-flying in *Pacific Edge*). All feature moments of illumination from important promontories.

Despite these shared narrative landmarks, the stories are not formalistically symmetrical. Although they are all set in Orange County, they center on different locations: San Onofre in *The Wild Shore*, the full county sprawl in *The Gold Coast*, and El Modena in *Pacific Edge*. Often, important motifs occur in two of the books but are missing in the third.¹⁹ The books do not simply fit on top of one another as variants of the same homologous structure, even though they share many elements. As we will see, in important instances, *The Wild Shore* and *The Gold Coast* involve thematic and narrative oppositions that *Pacific Edge* strives to mediate.

Unlike Robinson's Mars or Science in the Capital trilogies, with each phase requiring some knowledge of the events and ideas of the previous ones, the three California novels are not presented in advancing order. They are autonomous from one another, each a self-sufficient tale that does not require the others; they are also, however, related to one another via subtle subterranean relations. These relations must be constructed by the reader in a way not unlike the work that Delany expects from science-fiction readers. The surplus meaning in reading these novels derives not only from the successful interactive construction of an imaginary world, but also from the recognition that this construction is itself a pretext for the construction of a different kind of philosophical/conceptual artifact: a meditation on recognizing historical dimensions in moments of suchness. Each novel reveals its interdependence with the others only through the reader's recognition of resonances and transfor-

19. There are two spiritually illuminating alpine mountain hikes (in *The Gold Coast* and *Pacific Edge*, but not *Wild Shore*); there are two hilltops filled with spirits of history (Crete in *The Gold Coast*, Rattlesnake Hill in *Pacific Edge*, but none in *The Wild Shore*); in two, there are important wise outsiders (Tashi in *The Gold Coast*, Sally Tallhawk in *Pacific Edge*, but none in *The Wild Shore*); and there are maps provided for two of the tales (*The Gold Coast* and *The Wild Shore*), but not for *Pacific Edge*.

mations of tacitly shared elements that are never identical. And while their relationships do not form a historical dialectic, they do form a Zen-inflected one. In keeping with our opening aphorism, the Three Californias trilogy represents three phases of “mountains and rivers.” *The Wild Shore* represents an Orange County that is seen freshly, with a beginner’s mind, fully connected to wild nature, but also immature about historical change. *The Gold Coast* depicts a county that, while uncannily familiar, is no longer a real place, but a web of delusion invisible to most of its own inhabitants, who cannot imagine alternative ways of seeing and being. In *Pacific Edge*, the county is seen again as a concrete *home* though with enlightened eyes, as a place where nature and human actions are interdependent. Moreover, they represent three phases of historical awareness, a tool for which science fiction is extraordinarily well-suited. Science fictions usually narrate future histories, tales about pasts seen from a perspective in the future.²⁰ By projecting the narrative point of reference beyond the present, science-fiction stories foreground the future-orientation that is usually unacknowledged (and often unconscious) in most historical writing. The placement of the readerly present in the future makes the present, which most people view uncritically as a consummation of past developments, appear as a moment in the process of changing into something other than itself. Each of the *Three Californias* represents a phase in the division of historical experience into past, present, and future. Robinson fills these seemingly concrete temporal phases with the charges of Zen practice, the phases of naive beginning, disillusionment, and enlightened, compassionate understanding of interdependence.

The Wild Shore, in its literary language and adventure form, as well as its reduction of the nation to a primitive state, depicts a fetishized past. The romantic wish to escape from modernity’s violence and alienation through a return to wilderness is granted, as if by a genie. Most of the protagonists view the world naively, and indeed readers are drawn into a seemingly pure fiction of escape, a story-world that is simultaneously futuristic science fiction, historical fiction, and wilderness romance. Only gradually does it become clear that much of the story is a fictional vision even of the ostensibly naive diegetic past. Awareness of interdependence must evolve from this beginner’s mind, but without the illusion that there is a “true history” to guide it. In *The Gold Coast*, Robinson depicts an Orange County that is unnervingly plausible in its projection from

20. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. 76–110.

the present of 1988, and indeed today. No significant novums have arrived to divert the ruts of the neoliberal present, and nothing has intervened in the lives of the protagonists to significantly change their social relations since they were teenagers. For Jim McPherson, the Orange County of *The Gold Coast* is clearly an illusionary world without escape routes. Balanced on the razor's edge between nihilism and awareness of interdependence, Jim's present represents the experience of understanding emptiness, felt first through the emptiness of a received social world. Finally, in *Pacific Edge*, Robinson presents the future as a horizon of enlightened community based on the ecopolitical principles of continuity among human beings and nature. While the revolution has been successful, it, like Zen mindfulness, must be continually adapted to meet the constant inevitable changes that are, on one level, the work of nature, and on another, the work of history.

Robinson's characters do not practice meditation, parse the sutras, or debate fine points of dharma. The aesthetics of Zen are manifested indirectly. Robinson meditates on the relationship of an actually existing, physical, natural place with human activity not through epic vistas (such as his own Mars and alternative universal history in *The Years of Rice and Salt*), but through an intense focus on small-scale experiences in an actual physical place locatable by his readers. The California novels differ greatly in style. *The Wild Shore* works out the classic American coming-of-age-in-the-wilderness story using the rich sensory language of a budding writer raised on literary classics. *The Gold Coast* adopts the ironic forms of the social novel of alienation and the poetics of Beat impressionism. *Pacific Edge* is an exercise in the fiction of a world that no longer has a need for heroic exceptionalism. All the fictions nonetheless share qualities that comport with Zen aesthetics: each emphasizes ordinariness; each story is simple (a quality reinforced by their structural similarities), with a narrow focus; and none involves agents with mysterious, unconscious motivations held back from the reader by the author.

The implicit context of each novel is world-historical. The images of a future without the United States (a prefiguration of the world-without-Europe premise of *The Years of Rice and Salt*) and of the country as the victim of its own historical hegemony are the obscurely discerned backdrop of *The Wild Shore*. The vicious cycle of the cold war economy dominates *The Gold Coast*. And a social revolution disempowering multinational corporations and banks, and still continually fighting against conspiracies of greed to infiltrate and undermine it, grounds the action of *Pacific Edge*. Yet true to the

principles of Zen ordinariness, these world-dramas are condensed in the everyday struggles of local people in Orange County. This containment of vast historical dramas is paralleled by the containment of individual internal dramas. Characters are observed in the middle distance, even when they narrate the stories themselves. (Henry's first-person narrator in *The Wild Shore* seems to have no surer grasp of his own motivations than he does of others.) The psychological causes of characters' actions are matters of common sense; self-dramatization is not indulged. Human motivations are never idiosyncratic—there is no perversion, horror, super- or subhuman behavior. Their worlds have no secret impersonal or suprapersonal mind at work in the shadows, either demonic or benevolent. There are no secret powers in need of unpacking or exorcism. At the same time, this common-sense consciousness is shown to be incomplete and in need of supplementation. Shadows appear in dreams and vision-quests (the coyotes and geese in Oscar's night on the mountain in *Pacific Edge*, for example), or out of the corner of one's eye, or in mini-myths (such as Tom's fable of being split into two beings in *The Wild Shore*).

First There Are Mountains and Rivers (*The Wild Shore*).

The Wild Shore's first-person narrator, Henry Fletcher, retells an ostensibly naive adventure story of the Onofre River Valley (known in our own world as Onofre Creek) as a place returned to wilderness. Its social development has been drastically interrupted. Reduced to near-subsistence farming, fishing, and crafts, its inhabitants, the "grubbers" (as they are pejoratively called by the gypsy-like "scavengers" that live off the remains of the collapsed American civilization), are forced to choose whether to continue their focused though insular local autonomy or else to join in a network of resistance against the world order that demolished American national sovereignty. *The Wild Shore* is a specific kind of adventure: a novel of ordeal for both the young narrator and his entire community. While there is a local Big Man (John Nicolin) with great economic influence over the lives of the others, the village is nonetheless a primitive face-to-face democracy, in which decisions are made after debates and votes. The village decides to refrain from joining the nascent resistance movement spearheaded by the Huey Long-like mayor of San Diego, who is willing to run roughshod over the northern localities to consolidate a regional power that is racist and chauvinist in many ways. Despite the vote, a faction of young rebels (including the otherwise ambivalent Henry) joins the "Americans" in secret in an ill-considered

raid on a Japanese smuggling operation, only to discover that they are treated as rubes—with tragic consequences.

While the action of the novel involves familiar set pieces of romantic political epics—war councils, intrigues among would-be allies, enemies with superior technical powers, a decisive battle—they unfold on a resolutely small scale. This reduction to the local and familiar deflates the implicit epic heroism. The collision with powerful enemies is ultimately diminished. The Japanese, with their satellite lasers and island-sized battleships, have become touristic thrill-seekers. The war council is a raucous village plenum. The climactic battle scene is a chaotic, unheroic rout with only a handful of participants. Nonetheless, some heroism is required, even if on a minuscule scale. The Onofreans have no allies who will defend them against the world's quarantine, the political ambitions of the irredentists, and the amoral scavengers who have no investment in the land. A world deprived of bourgeois development reverts to its archaic form. The natural environment regains dominance. Hard work becomes central. Culture has to be reconstructed. The adventure form is clearly an apt carrier of values under such conditions.

The Wild Shore is conscious of how it deviates from its generic tradition. Like many traditional fictions, it tells of a journey to a new society out of a historically bound peasant-pastoral world. It follows specifically in a lineage of California science fiction, in works like George Stewart's *Earth Abides* and Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, of depicting the premodern reconstruction of human communities after the collapse of high-technological modern civilization.²¹ Stewart's novel, which Robinson has avowed as an influence,²² is exemplary of this subgenre. Its narrative unfolds evenly without technical flourishes or psychological idiosyncracies; characters are intentionally flat to accentuate their typicality; both sublime and grotesque effects are held to a minimum. The story—of the winnowing out of the majority of humanity by an unspecified plague and the slow reconstruction of small-scale hunter-gatherer communities as the modern technological infrastructure slowly col-

21. Elsewhere I have called this genre trope "apocalyptic winnowing"; see Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations," in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, ed. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 217–238.

22. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Pacific Overture: An Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 9, 2012. <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?type=&sid=151&fulltext=1&media=#article-text-cutpoint>.

lapses into ruins (a model that has clear echoes in Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*)—is intended unambiguously as a parable with classical overtones.

Robinson has called *The Wild Shore* an “after the fall” story.²³ Like *Earth Abides*, *The Wild Shore* uses the careful accretion of everyday details of social life in a semi-isolated valley with a hardscrabble economy. But he significantly varies Stewart's (and Le Guin's) model, in that the occasion for a civilization's collapse is not arbitrary or abstract (plague in Stewart; cataclysmic earthquakes in Le Guin), but topically historical and political. The coordinated neutron-bomb attacks by the Soviet Union are perversely rational responses to U.S. imperialist hegemony (their rationality affirmed by Tom, who believes that America was inviting such an attack through its hubris), and the quarantine that has reduced the country to primitivism is reasonably defended by the Japanese enforcers.

The apparent naiveté of *The Wild Shore* conceals its aspects of Zen realism; there are no explicit references to Buddhism. In fact, none of the characters have any recollection of it as a living religion, yet unstated Zen principles saturate the novel. The “fall” of Orange County into wilderness and the centrality of local place and community reflect the Zen insistence on freedom from the conventional paths of life and the importance of the familiar “in the wild.” This partly justifies Robinson's otherwise perplexing decision to change the climate of the region—a change that is not the result of world politics and war, but an arbitrary authorial decision of world-building. In neither of the later novels in the series is there a similar change. Each of the three novels' landscapes carries symbolic weight, as all landscapes must. In *The Wild Shore*, the transformation of Orange County into a dense forest with full rivers emphasizes two things: the difficulty of making a working community in an inhospitable climate, and the richness of human life in the midst of non-human nature. The first makes history especially hard and forces the “post-fall” inhabitants to choose whether to remain embedded in a world of scarcity and toil (but also with constant reminders of the great elemental forces like the ocean, especially in *The Wild Shore*—a novel mainly of waters), or else to return to the vector of civilization-consolidation, which had produced abundance, waste, and war; the second draws the Zen paradox of the wilderness home that is close to home.

In Zen, these two concepts—the wild and the home-place—are

23. Ibid.

simultaneously oppositions to and mutual condensations of each other (a dialectic particularly strong in the work of Snyder).²⁴ In early Zen practice, monks were encouraged to travel in places far from the human-produced networks of civilizations to experience the world without mediations—the legendary “Cold Mountain.”²⁵ In this sense, one needs to leave one’s home at the center of culture in order to gain freedom from received ideas. But enlightenment must come from recognizing suchness in what is most familiar and ordinary. And in this sense, the home becomes wild; the wilderness becomes home. Usually, these relationships have been best expressed in lyric and gnomic proverbs. But with the right deployment of means, the novel can be a strong vehicle also, given the medium’s natural dialectic of piling on the familiar details of habitability on the mythic structures of collective adventure, alienation, ordeal, and transformation. In *The Wild Shore*, science fiction gives this dialectic an original twist: the familiar details—of personal relationships, fishing and gardening, social conduct, local politics—are of behaviors that readers might have experienced, but in an environment that is uninhabitable because it is entirely imaginary.

Henry undergoes one disillusionment after another. His trust in the San Diego rebels is abused, as is his romance with scavenger spy Melissa Shank. He discovers his own capacity to betray his village’s democratic decisions under pressure from his hothead best friend Steve Nicola. A diegetic book purporting to be the record of an American who escaped the blockade and traversed the world, *An American Around the World* (penned by the suspiciously named Glen Baum), is shown to be a hoax. And ultimately the many stories Tom had told the village children about the old pre-attack days are also revealed to be tall tales. The obligatory motif of realistic disillusionment of the Bildungsroman leads, however, to unexpected consequences.

Henry is exhorted by Tom and his friends to write the “true history” of the recent events—the very story that readers have been reading all along. Henry professes that he feels incapable, but once the reader becomes aware that he is the author of the diegesis, both Henry and the reader are moved to another plane of discourse. Henry’s “true history” of Onofre is, of course, a work of science fiction, arguably with no more claim to validity than *An American Around the World*. True history is, in fact, a favorite subgenre of science fic-

24. Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (above, n. 6).

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–110.

tion, and Robinson subtly and humorously hints that the two works are closely related. The clue that alerts Tom to the fact that *An American Around the World* is fiction is its narrator's claim that Venice has been submerged by rising sea levels.²⁶ Tom and the other elders immediately see through it, since the sea has not risen on their coast. But it is also, in our own nondiegetic reality, the world depicted in Robinson's 1981 story "Venice Drowned."²⁷ On one level, it is a clever inside joke; on another, it is also an implicit alert: the true history is the work of the author of the false one.

This Moebius-like twist on the level of metafiction is not merely a literary device. Both science-fiction works—*An American Around the World* and *The Wild Shore*—inspire political responses from fictive agents. The former inspires Steve to emulate Glen Baum to escape from the quarantine, to see the world and take action for the political liberation of his land. *The Wild Shore* inspires Henry to sharpen his awareness of his insular though inexhaustibly rich world through clear, unexaggerated memory and recording. He discovers the meaning of his art in a small, ordinary, natural illumination, while observing the village women making baskets from the needles of Torrey pines:

The baskets they were weaving were made of old brown torrey pine needles, soaked in water so they were flexible again. Rebel took a needle and bunched together the five individual slices of it, so that they made a new cylinder. Then she curled the needle until it made a flat little wheel, and knotted several pieces of fishing line to it, splaying them out like spokes. Another pine needle was neatened up and tied around the outside of the first one. The first several needles were tied outside the ones before them, to make a flat bottom. Quickly it took two needles to make it around the circumference, then three. After that the nubs were set directly on top of each other, and the sides of the basket began to appear.²⁸

Watching Rebel coax the line between two needles and through a complicated little loop of line waiting for it, it occurred to me that I had a task somewhat like hers. When I penciled in my book, I tied together words like she tied together pine needles, hoping to make a certain shape with them. Briefly I wished I could make a book as neat and solid and beautiful as the basket Rebel wove. But it was beyond hope, and I knew it.

26. Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Wild Shore: Three Californias* (1984; reprint, New York: Orb Books, 1995), p. 251.

27. Kim Stanley Robinson, "Venice Drowned" (1981), in *Remaking History and Other Stories* (New York: Orb Books, 1995), pp. 11–35.

28. Robinson, *The Wild Shore* (above, n. 26), p. 351.

Rebel looked up and watched me watching her, and she laughed, embarrassed. "This sure is boring," she said. Kristen nodded her agreement, a wet pine needle drooping from her teeth.²⁹

In his careful attention to the immediacy of ordinary work, Henry achieves a small enlightenment—not into cosmic knowledge or political conviction, but into suchness and *wu shi*. It is "boring," but, so the novel implies, an image of true and right action.

Henry comes to no political-historical conclusions at the end of his history. Steve's path is unlikely to succeed, but neither Henry nor the author condemn him. After all, who can say in a world of fictive illusion what can and cannot happen? Henry ends his account literally at the wild shore where the Onofre River runs into the sea, contemplating nature as he has often before in the novel. He watches the river closely, noticing the pattern of no-pattern:

I'll tell you what I do know: the tide is out, and the waves roll up the river-mouth. At first it looks like each wave is pushing the whole flow of the river inland, because all the visible movement is in that direction. Little trailers of the wave roll up the bank, break over the hard sand and add their bit to the flat's stippled crosshatching. For a time it looks like the wave will push upriver all the way around the first bend. But underneath its white jumble the river has been flowing out to sea all the while, and finally the wave stops on top of this surge, breaks into a confused chop, and suddenly the entire disturbance is being borne out to sea—until it's swept under the next incoming wave, and the movement turns upriver again. Each wave is a different size, and as a result, there is an infinite variety of rippling, breaking, chopping, gliding. . . . The pattern is never once the same. Do you see what I mean?³⁰

Then There Are No Mountains and Rivers (*The Gold Coast*)

Jim McPherson, the main character of *The Gold Coast*, cannot come to such conclusions. In the Orange County of his future there are no rivers. The region's major riverbed, the Santa Ana, is dry; it contains only "sand, gravel, rocks, plastic shards, Styrofoam fragments, bits of metal, and pools of mud."³¹ The land has been paved into a Ballardian "autopia,"³² yet without the cold hysteria of Ballard's breakdowns. The characters operate in the banality of

29. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 370–371.

31. Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Gold Coast: Three Californias* (1988; reprint, New York: Orb Books, 1995), pp. 111–112.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

no-breakdown, a seamless extension of the Reagan-era development ethic into the future. Localities like San Onofre and El Modena of the other novels have been absorbed into the hypermall sprawl. The county has no centers or communities, merely the interminably circulating and intersecting economies of high-tech weapons manufacturing, designer-drug trafficking, and the commercial development of all open land. Nearly nothing has changed for the central characters since their high school years. With few exceptions, none practice right livelihoods, none experience nature directly, and none can imagine a better way of living. While there are no physical embargoes as in *The Wild Shore*, the characters can neither leave the enchanted circle nor change it. In this “postmodern world . . . every person is a sovereign entity”;³³ consequently, there can be no collective awareness; there is no true democratic activity or transparency. Defense companies compete for “superblack”—top-secret government-weapons contracts that are arbitrarily assigned and not accountable to public oversight. Political decisions about land use are made by real-estate developers turned government officials.

In *The Gold Coast's* Orange County, the world of *The Wild Shore* has been uprooted and inverted. The Onofrean village meetings are replaced by constant “lidding” parties (tellingly, designer drugs in the future Orange County are eye-dropped under the eyelids, directly affecting one’s worldview), and by secret confabs among drug smugglers and defense contractors. The earlier novel’s laborious interaction with nature is replaced by aimless milling around in an entirely human-produced environment. Nature and the past have been paved over. The ocean shore, where Henry undergoes an Odyssean ordeal in *The Wild Shore*, is colonized by gang-like “surf nazis.” The Cleveland National Forest, the last piece of undeveloped land in the county, has been opened to real-estate developers. Orange County is a techno-social bubble without ground or horizons. As Jim’s friend Tashi observes: “No land, seasons, fellow animals, work, religion, art, community, home, world. . . . Quite a list.”³⁴

The Gold Coast's Orange County is ironically a utopia, since it satisfies most material needs and operates on the ostensibly rational human principles of self-interest, maximization of pleasure, and growth. It even has its own quasi-mystical guiding principle: “Our job is to make sure everything moves along as fast as possible,”³⁵ as Jim’s boss and friend Humphrey tells him. It is a utopia gone

33. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

completely wrong, steadily demolishing the bases for enlightened action. Only three relatively minor characters have what Buddhists call right livelihoods—that is, vocations inspired by compassion and an understanding of interdependence. Jim's friend Abe and his partner Xavier drive a "gutbucket," an ambulance called most often to extricate victims of traffic accidents that are inevitable, even in a future when vehicles are guided on magnetic tracks. They alone witness the novel's sole death and sole birth. Hana Steentoft, Jim's eventual love interest, is a painter and art teacher devoted to values consciously drawn from Zen.

The Gold Coast's form and language is much more that of familiar critical-realist fiction than the other two novels, and in this sense it is disturbingly habitable by contemporary readers. An example of the "if this goes on" subgenre of dystopian science fiction, it hardly feels like a work of estranged fantasy at all. Its novums—stacked highways, magnetic automobile tracks, the Styx-90 solvent weapon that Arthur and Jim use to attack the weapons labs, new drugs—are so plausible that they seem ready to be deployed. In this sense, *The Gold Coast* is a classic example of science fiction as cognitive estrangement of our own social conditions. The slight science-fictional displacement causes just enough difference to make the contours of our own world clear, as if seen from the near future.

Like *The Wild Shore* and *Pacific Edge*, the narrative follows a somewhat hapless young man's formative years, but in a far more ironic world. Jim is a greatly diminished hero compared with Henry Fletcher and *Pacific Edge's* Kevin Claiborne. Unable to find meaning in his life, Jim grows more and more restless. In his frustration to take some sort of action, he sees no alternative but to move "forward into catastrophe": "History is a one-way street. It's only forward into catastrophe, or the track-and-mall inferno, or . . . or nothing. Nothing Jim can imagine anyway. But no matter what, there's no going back."³⁶ He joins his friend Arthur in an underground campaign to sabotage local armaments labs, including that of his father's employers. Their forays bring Jim a sense of moral excitement, the only times when he can feel "really alive, really living meaningful life."³⁷ The resistance movement, however, is revealed to be a sham, their acts of sabotage only a form of sophisticated arson used by corporations to write off unprofitable assets. In *The Gold Coast's* Orange County, political struggle is not only inevitably co-opted, it is a tool of the capitalist war trade. Jim's feeling of being really alive is no

36. Ibid., p. 152.

37. Ibid., p. 177.

more grounded than a drug high. Up to this point, *The Gold Coast* illustrates Fredric Jameson's notion that science fiction functions to illuminate our civilization's inability to imagine a future truly different from the present.³⁸ Jim's world appears to be a prison from which there can be no escape—neither to a past to which he is romantically attached (based on his grandfather Tom's nursing-home reminiscences) nor to a liberated future.

If not political struggle, what hope remains? The alternatives come first via Zen. Jim establishes early in the story that he is too restless to practice meditation: "[I am] the most wired Buddhist in history."³⁹ In his cohort of friends, only Tashi, who lives off the grid in a rooftop tent, is able to lose himself in nature. First, it is in surfing: "There's a kind of religious rapture in feeling this movement: as the universe is an interlocking network of wave motions, hitting the stride of this particular wave seems to click him into the universal rhythm. Nothing but gravitational effects, slinging him along. Tuning fork buzzing, after a tap of God's fingernail."⁴⁰ After Jim rambles through the county firing Styx-90 missiles at randomly chosen institutions that make the county what it is ("everything purely organized, to buy and sell, buy and sell every little piece of us"),⁴¹ Tashi spirits him out of the county to lie low in the Sierras.

Like a Zen master, a *sensei*, Tashi guides Jim to become aware of his mountain environment. Pushed to his physical limit in his first genuine encounter with nature, Zen-like qualities of mind slowly emerge in Jim. He finds himself thinking of nothing⁴²—and perceiving a world that is the opposite of his human, regulated, superficial one, analogous to Henry's revelation of the pattern of no-pattern at the end of *The Wild Shore*: "He can't characterize the landscape yet, it's too new, but there's something in its complexity, the anarchic profusion of forms, that is mesmerizing to watch. Nothing has been planned. Nevertheless, it is very complex. No two things are the same. And yet everything has an intense coherence."⁴³ In a final mountain revelation, he acknowledges that the grandeur and richness of nature is "a home": "He realizes with a flush in his

38. Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" (1982), in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 281–295.

39. Robinson, *The Gold Coast* (above, n. 31), p. 66.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

nerve-endings, with a strange, physical rapture, that this will be the longest night of his life. Each moment, long and quiet, spent discovering a world he never knew existed—a home. He had thought it a lost dream; but this is California too, just as real as the rock underneath his sore butt. He raps the granite with scraped knuckles. Soon the moon will rise over the range."⁴⁴ And yet, although Tashi teaches Jim finally to be still, his path cannot be followed. After he returns Jim to Orange County, Tashi departs alone to the Alaskan wilderness, a version of the Cold Mountain path. For Jim, a helpless novice in nature, that path is not an option.

Hana appears to offer a valley alternative: artistic vision disciplined by Zen awareness. She emphasizes the connection between clarity of perception and clarity of purpose: "focusing your vision means a change in the way you pay attention to things. A clarification of your aesthetic sense, and of your moral sense as well."⁴⁵ Jim has viewed Zen as "hopelessly apolitical,"⁴⁶ but he is powerfully attracted to its art. For much of the novel, Jim's own main attempts at art have been his tentative poetry—raw jumbles of thoughts randomly strung together or rearranged, much like the flow of thoughts in a restless meditator's mind. These paratactic poems interspersed throughout the text resemble the Zen poetic forms beloved by the Beats. They may be thin gruel artistically, but they have an unusual power in the novel. Jim is embarrassed by their rawness and lack of vision. He tries to tart them up into "post-postmodern"⁴⁷ poems by running them through a randomizer program, but he cannot make them meaningful for himself and is even ashamed to show them to Hana. However, these simple recordings of impressions in *The Gold Coast* turn out not be Jim's alone. At first, they are indubitably Jim's "experiments."⁴⁸ But as the story unfolds they sometimes appear when Jim is not present in the narrative; some are attached to Tashi, others to Sandy and even teams of characters: to Abe and Xavier, Tashi and Sandy, and even to Jim's engineer-father Dennis—the character least likely to think impressionistically.⁴⁹ Readers are not invited to reflect on these extremely muted shifts of the Zen-like

44. *Ibid.*, p. 364.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

49. The poetic streams in *ibid.* are as follows: the one attached to Tashi appears on p. 95; to Sandy, on p. 146; to Abe and Xavier, on p. 163; to Tashi and Sandy, on p. 203; and to Dennis McPherson, on p. 58.

observing mind from character to character, but they have a subtle effect on the narrative. An observant, alert mind operates in a discursive register independent of the novel's vortex of action and desire. It might be argued that the poems hint that the novel is authored by Jim, in the same way that Henry Fletcher is the author of the previous novel: namely, that *The Gold Coast* has both diegetic and nondiegetic ontologies. But unlike Henry, Jim is not entrusted with this task by the story; it entrusts him with another one: to write a true history of Orange County. This one, unlike the science-fiction fantasy of *The Wild Shore* (which, however cognitively estranging it may be, remains a fantasy), must also be true for the reader.

Much as he admires Tashi and Hana, neither the mountain nor the valley Zen paths are Jim's own. He can inhabit neither the non-human heights nor the human here and now. Near the end of the novel Jim is left alone in the apartment he had trashed at the beginning of his rampage. His friends have scattered, his lover is disgusted with his apparent fickleness and shallowness, he has torn his beloved historical maps of Orange County to shreds. Deprived of attachments, he acknowledges that he is now free to make his own decisions. He reconnects with his uncle Tom, who reminds him of his long-deferred project of writing a history of the county. Throughout the novel, Jim has been haunted by a sense of historical loss, the loss of the natural land:

Out the window is the single stretch of California's coast left undeveloped: the center of U.S. Marine Camp Joseph H. Pendleton. Dark hills, a narrow coastal plain cut by dry ravines, covered with dark brush. Grass gray in the moonlight. Something about it is so quiet, so empty, so pure. . . . My God, he thinks. . . . The land. A pang of loss pierces him: this land that they live on, under its caking of concrete and steel and light—it was a beautiful place once. And now there's no way back.⁵⁰

In a fine depiction of Jim's face-to-face encounter with his own writing, he feels "the anguish of his own experience infuses the sentences, fills the county's short and depressing history of exploitation and loss."⁵¹ Jim recognizes that he must finish the work he has been putting off for so long, of writing "the central moment, the hinge point in the story when it changed for good."⁵² The result is a carefully detailed remembrance from his own childhood of the destruction of the county's name-giving orange groves, full of presence,

50. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

sensory memory, and his own place in the story. At its conclusion, “[a] couple of supervisors walk around the dirt lot, planning the next day’s work. They stop by a stack of wood next to the shredder. It’s quiet, you can hear the freeway in the distance. A single boy sits on a crater’s edge, staring off at the distance. Cars pass by. Eucalyptus leaves spinnerdrift to the ground. The sun disappears. The day is done, and shadows are falling across our empty field.”⁵³ Finding his true subject and the “empty field” to write it in, Jim alloys the clear observation and openness of traditional Zen writing that had glimmered in his personal meditations with a story of his community. The clarity of vision, as Hana explained, has brought a moral clarity as well: “Clearly, he’ll never be able to resolve his ambivalence regarding his hometown, and the generations who made it. Impossible to separate the good from the bad, the heroic from the tawdry.”⁵⁴ In this moment of self-recognition, Jim lets go of his frustration and moral-political rage, the need for self-justification that is also the source of his self-loathing. In effect, he recognizes history as one of the main dimensions of suchness. His history of the county now incorporates his “ambivalence.” The whole past needs to be acknowledged, both the beauty of the natural history and the grotesque struggles of the social history.

I consider this moment a significant gesture in recent America Zen writing and in thought by Robinson. In Zen, historical transformations have been treated as inessential and ultimately insignificant. Robinson, in *The Gold Coast*, makes a move to synthesize the notions of the natural dialectical flow of *samsara* and *nirvana* (appearance and ultimate emptiness) that are so central to Zen with the flow of human history. The interdependent relations of human experience include each community’s relations to its own past actions, seen as its own particular kind of moral causality. Historical time also is part of the web condensed into each moment of suchness.

Like *The Wild Shore*, *The Gold Coast* ends with the finishing of a book, another true history. Henry’s is fictional, and after its completion he has an understanding of the significant pattern of no-pattern of the waters’ natural currents. Jim’s, by contrast, is not a fictional true history; it is the past of the Orange County of our own reality, and even *The Gold Coast*’s fiction’s author is literally implicated. Jim understands the pattern of no-pattern of his own home only after he has lost all ground and home. He recovers it in his understanding that its past is inextricably intertwined with the telling of his own place in it.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 387 (emphasis in original).

54. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

In the end, *The Gold Coast* leaves its readers seeing history as one piece of a complex human puzzle, and the relationship of the novel's imaginary future and the actual history of the county is unstable. Although it seems implied that that history is a firm ground whose recovery can help combat the anomie of the present, the alternative world in which it appears cannot help but call into question that history's objectivity. The Zen irony is that the history is not an objective record, but a compassionate construction of the imagination illuminating the interdependence of nature and human culture, of past and present and future (embodied in the science-fiction alternative future). Jim's new historical ground is both real and fictive, and the novel ends with him on Hana's doorstep, hoping for a reconciliation though uncertain of what will come next.

Then There Are Mountains and Rivers (*Pacific Edge*)

Zen motifs appear early and emphatically in *Pacific Edge*. The utopian community of El Modena is a kind of secular Zentopia, in which Zen principles comport seamlessly with daily life. The rational rules of social life have been aligned with the flows of nature in a self-reflective, well-managed "natureculture."⁵⁵ Material development has been reined in; destructive ambitions, collective and individual, have been tamed. Communal ritual practices reinforcing these restraints develop naturally from daily life. The ordinariness of *wu shi* pervades everything. Each individual is expected to contribute mundane work for the community. Relations are face to face. Politics revolves around modest agreements and competitions regarding the careful use of revered land and water. Most citizens have no greater aspirations than to have good relations with their neighbors and to protect their environment. Reverence for the continuity

55. On "naturecultures," see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). Latour's emphasis has been on establishing the constructed character of any conception of the natural. Haraway has expanded Latour's position into a more bio-friendly ecopolitics, but both currents of the "new materialism" approach the matter primarily from the perspective of (scientific) culture and transformative cultural practice. "Nature" in this model is the fetishized term that needs to be deconstructed for a flexible ecopolitics to emerge. Snyder approaches the question from the other side, viewing human cultural-knowledge projects (presumably including new materialisms—a term that implies a shadow dualism) as exaggerated and unconscious attempts to dominate the domain of the "fluid, open, and conditional" that Snyder associates with nature (see Gary Snyder, "Preface," in *No Nature* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1992]). Where Latour and Haraway focus on the mediation of machines and technological cultures in the construction of nature, Snyder emphasizes the need to attend to the givenness of earth-scale mesocosmic processes as a basis for ecopolitics.

of natural and social being and right action, mindfulness, and moderation in all things (including, as the community shaman Hank puts it, moderation in moderation itself) are consciously held social principles. Religion has become playful; spiritual experience has become continuous with daily life. Abstract principles are rarely disconnected from physical practice. Community softball (slow pitch, of course, versus the hardball of the world) has become the channel for mediating local competitions, with a low-key spiritual dimension: "playing as a kind of praying."⁵⁶ The town council meeting has become the central political institution.⁵⁷ Ostensibly, the mysteries of collective and personal life have been resolved, the social heart's desire achieved; there seems to be no need to struggle against greedy corporations or hungry ghosts. It is seemingly a Snyderian dynamic utopia, built where the vectors of anarchism, naturalist ecopolitics, and Zen converge.⁵⁸

While provisions are made for the desires of some to excel others in individual wealth, the society has been so successful in constraining them that a certain complacency has set in. Kevin Claymore, the main protagonist, exemplifies it. When the novel opens, he is at one with his world, a true child of his material utopia:

Kevin felt the scent of the land fill him. Light as a balloon. Sudden joy in the cool spring night. God existed in every atom . . . , in every molecule, in every particulate jot of the material world, so that he was breathing God deep into himself with every fragrant breath. And sometimes it really felt that way, hammering nails into new framing, soaring in the sky, biking through the night air. . . . He knew the configuration of every tree he passed, every turn in the path, and for a long moment rushing along he felt spread out in it all, interpenetrated, the smell of plants part of him, his body a piece of the hills, and all of it cool with a holy tingling.⁵⁹

56. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge: Three Californias* (1990; reprint, New York: Orb Books, 1995), p. 10.

57. "Anarchism, in political history, does not mean chaos, it means self-government. So a truly anarchist society is a self-governing society. We all need to learn better how to govern ourselves. And we can do that by practice, and practice means you have to go to meetings, and going to meetings means you'll be bored, and so you better learn how to meditate" (see Eliot Weinberger, "Interview: Gary Snyder, The Art of Poetry No. 74," *Paris Review* 141 [1996]. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1323/the-art-of-poetry-no-74-gary-snyder>).

58. Snyder's linking of Buddhism and anarchism pervades his corpus. Perhaps Snyder's most succinct statement is "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," in his *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 90–93. The essay originally appeared in 1961 under the title "Buddhist Anarchism."

59. Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (above, n. 56), p. 32.

We learn soon enough that Kevin is a bit of a holy fool, a 32-year-old man who has never been in love, taking his spot on the town council for the first time and innocent of the forces of the wider world beyond Orange County. (A representative of the Green Party, he is green in more ways than one.) Even so, it is clear that his innocence is fully reinforced by the culture of El Modena. Kevin is the exemplary Utopian Man.

Robinson's El Modena makes it easy. Politically, it synthesizes ecologism (minimal interference with natural processes), anarchism (collective self-determination of the community based on shared obligations), and symbolic, ritualized identification with natural forces. The Zen-like emphasis on ordinariness and interdependence is the result of this synthesis, not its cause. El Modena is like a large, ragged, earthy *sangha*, a quasi-Buddhist monastic community, in which a diverse collection of individuals thrives through their agreement to respect core principles of interdependence. In *Pacific Edge's* future, all California communities have agreed to their own specific ways of managing their water resources, trade relations, and land development. These are determined not only by social will, but by their natural locations. Communities with access to plentiful water like Bishop in Inyo County thrive by managing and leveraging it over aggressive water-poor counties like Los Angeles; others, such as Santa Barbara, decide to manage their meager water resources without entangling themselves in the external dependencies of the social water market. El Modena sits in the middle, a low-key paradise of natural and social moderation sitting above a moderate underground water system sufficient for its modest needs. (It helps the El Modena idyll that the weather in *Pacific Edge's* Orange County seems always to be temperate and sunny, in sharp contrast with the tempestuous climate of *The Wild Shore* and the cataclysmic storm at sea in which Tom dies.)

This smoothly functioning political system, with its rational laws, is reinforced by newly evolved folkways. Sports play a prominent role, as in most of Robinson's fiction; they represent the nearly seamless intersection of rule-governed practice, physical embodiment, and ritual resolutions of naturally occurring conflicts. As in each of the Three Californias, sports represent their cultures' values and are required for their maintenance. Kevin's main pleasure with his lover, Ramona, is flying two-person pedal-gliderns equipped with nose propellers fueled by their pilots' energetic pedaling. Not only are the gliders ecologically low-impact, but they allow flyers to have a bird's-eye view of their community if they are willing to put in the physical work, pedaling hard just to stay aloft, analogous

to the broader political effort to maintain the community's social organization. Ocean swimming is as important in *Pacific Edge* as in the two earlier novels. Oscar Baldaramma, the new town lawyer who observes his community as an affectionate, urbane outsider, describes the "village idiocy" of El Modena's cultural contentment: "I'm in the land where culture consists of a vigorous swim workout followed by a discussion of the usefulness of hand paddles."⁶⁰ It is not an idle joke: in the heroic early phase of their love affair, Kevin and Ramona swim together with such ease and comfort—and without hand paddles!—that they seem to become sea animals:

Cool salt tang, the luxurious sensuality of immersion, flotation, the return to the sea. Kevin sharked over rippled and tawny sand on the bottom, looked up through silver bubbles at the surface, saw its rise and fall, its curious partial reflectivity, sky and sand both visible at once. Long graceful body in a dark red suit, swimming overhead with powerful stokes. Women are dolphins, he thought, and laughed a burst of silver at the sky. He ran out of air and shot to the surface, broke into the blinding white air, eyes scored by salt and sun, delicious stinging.⁶¹

Later, on the moonlit beach, they "grunioned around."⁶²

By far the most prominent and symbolically freighted Zen-like sport in *Pacific Edge* is softball. The local leagues are barely displaced versions of community softball leagues that have played an important life in U.S. towns for many decades. Slow-pitch softball allows people of varying skills to participate on a team together. (The slowness of the pitch essentially invites batters to hit it; the intimidation factor of hardball pitching is nearly absent.) It is played on a field famous for its pastoral qualities. Because the stakes in status are low (fame in local lore being the highest attainment), there is little opportunity for commodified star power in community softball. Unlike the other important sports of the trilogy—gliding, hiking, biking,

60. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 133. In *The Wild Shore*, Henry's prowess as a swimmer establishes his value for the "American" rebels and saves him from being drowned after he escapes from a Japanese warship. In *The Gold Coast*, as we have seen, surfing is Tashi's form of ecstatic meditation, which he is forced to abandon by the "surf nazis." Although it may be quibbling, I disagree with Tom Moylan's reading of this passage that Kevin is objectifying/reducing Ramona to animal status (see Moylan, "Utopia is when out lives matter": Reading Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*," *Utopian Studies* 6:2 [1995]: 18). Kevin clearly identifies himself as first a playful shark and then a sea mammal when he needs to breach the surface for air. In any case, identification with animals in *Pacific Edge* is never a reduction in dignity, but a gain.

surfing, and swimming—softball has sophisticated, complex, traditional rules. Some of these involve subtle infinities: for example, the baselines from home plate radiate without abstract limits, and the inning system allows games potentially to be played forever, if no team is ahead at the end of a decisive inning. These are rules of social convention and agreement. Because the fields and players are real actors on the ground, certain things can be changed by agreement on the spot; once the temporary agreement has been reached, it must stand. This is the significance of the episode in which Kevin's sister describes a heartbreaking game she has umpired in Bangladesh. Because of a muddy field the players agree that home base should be moved slightly. A scrappy, independent women's team makes a heroic comeback against a team associated with former landowners, only to have the apparently winning run disqualified, because the runner crossed the "old" home base, not the one newly agreed upon. Kevin excels at the sport, because he is always, naturally "in the zone" when he plays. As a third baseman he becomes a "mongoose jumping on cobras";⁶³ his season-long near perfect hitting streak is a gentle parody of Eugen Heugel's famous *Zen in the Art of Archery*, a prominent text in the early cult period of American Zen enthusiasm.

Kevin's profession as house builder/carpenter also carries obvious symbolic freight. He is one of those who concretely constructs utopian dwelling places. He works alongside Hank, the village minister cum shaman cum carnival chieftain, who has been loosely trained in Native American religions ("he was once a student in that Native American seminary down in New Mexico," as Oscar puts it).⁶⁴ For Hank, building seems to be a form of meditation, an endless *satori*-generator. For Kevin, by contrast, it is yet another way to revel in his animal spirits. These are the two states of mind that El Modena's social arrangement seems to privilege. The central rituals rarely involve sacrifice; they are celebrations of the playful energies shared by meditation and "becoming animal" of Native American traditions. A party given to celebrate the landing of a manned spacecraft on Mars is an occasion for the cohort to become literal party animals by taking on animal masks and names. Erotic play ensues, but not only erotic. Oscar, the least experienced at becoming animal, finds himself on an involuntary vision quest in which he is guided by a flock of geese and a pack of coyotes. In that moment, predators, prey beasts, and a human being sleep together contentedly on mountain ledge in a small-scale peaceable kingdom. The El Modena

63. Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (above, n. 56), p. 319.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

community is powerfully drawn to identification with animals. Notably, they insist on referring to the central object of the story—the last undeveloped hill that Mayor Alfredo and his shadowy backers wish to build on—as Rattlesnake Hill, and resist the official name, Orange Hill, as it is designated “on the maps.”⁶⁵

The blessed simplicity of El Modena's life—at least from Kevin's perspective, but not only his—is based on an illusion of naive transparency, which the novel's style seems to reinforce with its own apparent lack of a hidden symbolic dimension. Kevin is a house builder not so that he can be an allegorical figure, but because in a world of free communication, the symbolic dimension and the pragmatic are not differentiated. It is a *tathata* world as such—or so it seems.

In fact, *Pacific Edge* takes the reader through a Zen dialectic that condenses the larger moves of the trilogy. Kevin appears to us at the beginning with naive awareness. He, and the readers who follow his free, indirect narrative, is gradually forced to *reflect*—to self-divide in order to self-observe—by the converging crises of a love affair, in which he must learn to recognize the otherness of his lover and her life-world, and of the threat to his community by Alfredo's secret plot to develop the last wild hill in the town. Given the small size of the community and its face-to-face nature of doing business, it is only natural that the two crises intersect when his lover Ramona returns to her previous long-time partner, who is Kevin's political and ethical adversary—Alfredo himself. Kevin is forced to reflect on the underground, socially unconscious forces of collective greed that have been undermining his naive reality all along, as well as his own hidden attachments. Kevin begins to be aware that he and his community are self-divided; in meditation, this is the phase of “reflective negation.”

Kevin's catalyzing Siddhartha moment arrives when he realizes that Rattlesnake Hill is under threat. He is so attached to the hill from his childhood memories and family lore that he considers it a part of himself, “his hill.”⁶⁶ Knowing that he lacks what Buddhists call “skillful means,” Kevin turns to Tom Barnard, who has the role of Kevin's grandfather in this novel. We gradually learn that Tom is not only a venerated town elder, but one of the principal architects of the historical transformation that brought about the utopian society. As he approaches Tom's disheveled house on a hill, what he sees is precariously perched between the *wabi sabi* of a hermit sage's dwelling and the junkyard of a disillusioned old man:

65. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

It was a small weather-beaten cabin, perched on a ridge that boxed the little canyon they had ascended. A big front window looked down on them, reflecting clouds like a monocle. Walls of cracked shingle were faded to the color of sand. Weeds grew waist high in an abandoned garden, and sticking out of the weeds were broken beehive flats, rain barrels, mountain bikes rusted or disassembled, a couple of grandfather clocks broken open to the sky.⁶⁷

At first, Tom plays the Zen *sensei*. He deflects Kevin's pleas for help in planning strategy against Alfredo by concentrating on filling two buckets with water from an outdoor pump:

Tom shrugged, moved the full bucket from under the spigot and replaced it with an empty one. Stymied, Kevin moved the full bucket onto flat ground and sat beside it.

"You don't want to help?"

"I'm done with that stuff, Kevin. It's your job now." He said this with a friendly, birdlike glance.

Second bucket filled, Tom pulled out the pump handle and put it in a slot on the pump's side. He lifted the two buckets and started back toward the cabin.

"Here, let me take one of those."

"That's okay, thanks. I need the two for balance."⁶⁸

Tom's buckets evoke the famous Zen aphorism linking enlightenment and ordinariness: "Before enlightenment—chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment—chop wood, carry water."

Tom apparently gives Kevin the freedom and obligation to come to his own political enlightenment, using a classical, even somewhat parodistic Zen posture of simplicity as his skillful means. But immediately after Kevin leaves, Tom becomes aware that his hermit-like detachment is not the result of enlightened serenity, but a "great solitude"⁶⁹—depression and grief at the loss of his wife some years earlier. Rattlesnake Hill, which was a favorite site for their love after the revolution upon which he had planted a thick grove of trees, still requires his commitment. It is a place where personal delight in the open and the struggle to preserve the commons intersect.

Kevin's small-scale struggles with sentimental consciousness cannot be resolved until Tom gives up his retreat and returns to active participation in the collective. The grief-ridden solitude he has inhabited is first shaken by an unforeseen meeting with an old rev-

67. Ibid., p. 52.

68. Ibid., p. 55.

69. Ibid., p. 62.

olutionary associate, Nadezhda Katayev, who inspires him to love and act again. Tom comes down from his mountain. He illuminates Kevin about the intricate webs of corruption and greed of which Alfredo's plan for Rattlesnake Hill is only a tiny piece. Overtly rejecting the stereotypical caricature of the Zen elder who has renounced the world, Tom releases his grip on all the things he had believed had completed his life. First, he renounces his attachment to his grief for his dead wife; later, he watches his house burn down. The pragmatic and the symbolic cohere again in this parable-like episode. Both Tom and the revolutionary community he helped to found are in a moment of transition when the old, now ramshackle innocent structures are being transformed. Hank, with parabolic practicality, collects the nails: "house burns, save the nails,"⁷⁰ he tells Tom, implying that the principles of utopian work should be saved to be used again on new structures. Tom lets go of his solitude, his house, his town, his land, and, finally, in "a euphoria of release," his life.⁷¹

Pre-utopian readers that we are, most of us gradually sense that Tom's is the more impinging story of *Pacific Edge*, not Kevin's. Kevin has one small act to perform: to protect the commons of Rattlesnake Hill from clandestine corporate control. Tom, by contrast, carries the weight of a two-generation-long struggle to transform the world from a dystopia to a utopia. In the three novels of the California trilogy, Tom is the only character that can be cast as extraordinary, perhaps even heroic. In the notebooks he writes as he is expelled, arrested, and interned in a dystopia with even more chilling similarities to our own condition than when the novel was published in 1988, we see Tom gradually take on the revolutionary task of global transformation, a task that he explicitly links to abandoning the project of writing a utopian fiction. In the final chapters of *Pacific Edge*, Tom recounts the history of the nonviolent legal actions he and his cohort undertook to create the world in which the main part of the novel, the El Modena pastoral, takes place.

Given these terms, Tom is a dubious candidate for a Zen *sensei*. Heroism and dramatically sacrificial acts rarely play a role in American Zen writings; they contrast strongly with the implicit modesty and letting go of ego attachments of Buddhist practice. Both Henry in *The Wild Shore* and Jim in *The Gold Coast* flirt with heroic postures, but neither of them performs decisive acts for their communities and both ultimately renounce their ambitions for the more mundane tasks of memorializing their places. In *Pacific Edge*, by

70. Ibid., p. 237.

71. Ibid., p. 297.

contrast, the creation of the harmonious social order apparently depended on the rejection of writing and the embrace of forward action. This is so even though the historical artist's niche filled in *The Wild Shore* by Henry and in *The Gold Coast* by Jim is Tom's in *Pacific Edge*. The notebook entries that break up the El Modena story are Tom's reflections on strategies for constructing a utopian novel in a repressive security-state. In this, Tom stands in for the author just as Jim did at the conclusion of *The Gold Coast*. Tom's reflection on the difficulties of imagining, and then writing, a valid and effective utopia are unquestionably Robinson's own thoughts about writing the very text in which they are embedded. This immediacy creates a powerful connection between Tom's persona and the reader, intensified by the notebook's first-person narrative voice. But Tom's abandoned novel is not the one we read as *Pacific Edge*. For much of the book, we are enticed to believe that Kevin's tale is embedded in Tom's utopia, just as *The Wild Shore* was Henry's "true history." Yet in chapter 10, Tom records that he destroyed his notes while he was interned by American security forces. He is persuaded to pick up his pen again by a fellow inmate, but it is to bear witness to his fellow prisoners' suffering, not to continue pursuing the novel. He tells us emphatically, "I will not write that book."⁷²

Splits between worldly, quasi-realistic narrators and their utopian fantasy worlds are not infrequent in utopian fiction. The marked separation between a realistic frame world and the imaginary one is a feature that some consider a structural aspect of the utopian genre, reflecting the deep chasm between utopian writings' textuality and the dream of actually existing, material, utopian social relations.⁷³ But the cut between Tom's notebook and the El Modena pastoral is more jagged than most. Tom explicitly denies even that the two texts are related. Carol Franko has argued that this chasm is bridged in the final chapters, when Tom relates the history of his participation in founding the new order in which El Modena emerged:

The "true" relations between Kevin's story and Tom's text remain ambiguous until the penultimate chapter and are not "perfectly clear" until the final one. Robinson's readers then see that the main storyline and utopia proper of *Pacific Edge* depend on/are generated by the fragmented *other* narrative embedded in

72. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

73. Fredric Jameson, "On Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 75-102; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "Notes on Mutopia," *Postmodern Culture* 8:1 (1997). <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.997/csicsery.997>.

it, but in a "historical" rather than a metafictional sense. This is a utopian novel about a utopian novel that wasn't written; alternatively, it is a utopian novel that Tom Barnard would approve because it "invent[s] the history leading out of this world (please) into the world of the book" (147). Robinson's historicizing of the textual relation between Tom's *Bildung* and the utopia-in-process of Kevin's story addresses a question central to both utopian studies and oppositional politics, that of agency. Robinson's fiction affirms that in order to remember or invent the subject-agent who resists as well as enacts oppressive ideologies we must recognize "two histories": the "subject's self-narrative" and the subject's inevitable engagement in "everyone else's history."⁷⁴

I don't think Robinson's enigmatic structuring of *Pacific Edge* is "saying" that people shouldn't write or read utopian novels, although he certainly makes us self-conscious about the strangeness of both activities. Rather, his practice of writing plots that turn on their own recontextualizations makes readers participate in his preoccupation with otherness, history, contingency, and hope. . . . We are "constructed" to undergo the intersubjective education of his characters.⁷⁵

Franko's tracing of the utopian double-narrative in *Pacific Edge* is cogent, but I think there is another dimension at play in *Pacific Edge*. The fact remains that the two narratives do not dovetail at the end; their relationship is neither metafictional, as in *The Wild Shore*, nor historico-fictional, as in *The Gold Coast*. Franko argues that Tom provides, in his lecture on the teaching ship *Ganesh*, the plausible historical linkages from the real present to the completed future that he demanded from a good utopian fiction.⁷⁶ These sutures appear just a few pages before Tom's death, and there are a few more at the end of the book. It is an unusual place to put such a powerful backstory. One could argue that it is a clever device of delaying the final piece of a narrative puzzle. From another perspective, however, it does not solve a puzzle, but rather accentuates that the putative dramatic, and indeed heroic, center of the story has been suppressed, almost excised—namely, the revolution itself.

Pacific Edge tells a story about a land that, to paraphrase Brecht, no longer needs heroes. While Tom conveys much of the information about the shadowy networks of illicit global corporations to Kevin's team, his trajectory in the novel is not one of action, but of letting go: of his hermitage, his house, his town, his land, and

74. Carol Franko, "Working the 'In-Between': Kim Stanley Robinson's Utopian Fiction," *Science-Fiction Studies* 21:2 (1994): 205–206 (emphasis in original).

75. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

his life. True, the novel's structure gives these moments a somewhat sacrificial tinge. After all, nothing that Kevin and his crew achieve can come about until Tom renounces his various attachments, all of which in one way or another are obstructions—even if only in the novel's plotting—to the realization of Kevin's dream plan. Without Tom's death, there would be nothing to memorialize on Rattlesnake Hill.

The revolutionary activity in *Pacific Edge* comes mainly in the form of letting go of attachments. Tom lets go of his grief and solitude, and indeed also the place where he constructed his revolutionary utopia on the Pacific edge, whose very existence depends on people dedicated to staying in place. His burning house allows him to leave California. In the end, he lets go of his life in a natural storm on a shoreless ocean. Oscar, for his part, lets go of his ironic urbane detachment, allowing himself to be herded by geese and coyotes on his accidental vision quest. Doris lets go of her snappish resentment. Kevin lets go most of all—of his love for Ramona, his enmity with Alfredo, his hitting streak (and with it his ever more nagging investment in personal success), and at the end, the final letting go of his worried consciousness, allowing the dream in which his unconscious puts together a solution out of several irresolvable problems—what Tom Moylan calls the intersection plan and dream.⁷⁷

The one thing that none of these characters lets go of is Rattlesnake Hill. One of the main elementary forms of Zen meditation is to concentrate attention on a focal object until the object's ostensible self-singularity dissolves, revealing the innumerable interdependencies the object shares with all other objects until the object is "emptied" of itself and "filled" with an infinite field of potentialities. Often, it is recommended that such focal objects be as small, present, unassuming, and natural as possible. Rattlesnake Hill is such an object in *Pacific Edge*. It is a scruffy little promontory; it harbors no endangered species of plants or fauna; there are no aboriginal burial grounds nor ecologically significant water sources; it has none of the specially scheduled qualities that would allow it to be protected by abstract laws and policies. Indeed, its very ordinariness prevents it from being protected outside the community. And it is this ordinariness that allows the communal solution to be reached. Having learned about the subterranean worlds and watched the political strategies unfold around him, like a ready batter at home plate who enters "the zone," Kevin allows himself to dream a plan: that

77. Moylan, "Utopia is when our lives matter" (above, n. 62), p. 15.

the hill can only be saved as a commons if the community itself sacralizes it. In a small re-enchanted grove, dream, wild nature, veneration of the past, protection of the future, and profound personal attachments of a community whose intention is clear all converge. Because it is the node of El Modena's construction of community, the community cannot become unattached to it and still remain a community. Rattlesnake Hill ceases to be a hill and becomes the zone of interaction. But it is, of course, also a hill: "People die, rivers go on. Mountains go on."⁷⁸

78. Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (above, n. 56), p. 312.