Book Review


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In a moving autobiography of the life of a geographer, Edmunds Bunkse weaves a tale that serves not only the literature of the geography, but also history, humanities and the arts, and philosophy. Using the construct of his own life experiences, living through World War II in war-torn Latvia, immigrating to the United States, and returning to his homeland after many years away, the author explains the “art of geography” rather than the science.

Bunkse believes not in the study of geography so much as the study of geosophy, or the combination of philosophy and geography. As he travels through the narrative of his life, the author discusses such topics as geographic sensibilities, sense of place, the beautiful and the sublime in landscapes, and the theory of intimate immensity. Throughout the book there is a unifying theme of the home and the road and how they contribute to a sense of place. Bunkse explains that the home, while a place of safety and security, does not always have to be a literal building. In many cases, such as his own experiences with fleeing invading Russian soldiers as a child, the road, which is normally associated with fear and instability, can in fact become like a home.

Each of the premises which Bunkse ponders within *Geography and the Art of Life*, while rarely discussed in traditional geography classes, are the basis of geography as a part of the humanities. In fact, the author states that the purpose of the book is to explain, “…how we make sense of geographic places in an artistic way” (5). The richness
of imagery in Bunkse’s words positions the reader in his landscapes, whether it is Latvia of World War II, the American West, or the Soviet Union just prior to the fall of communism. He appeals to the “…landscape of the senses…” (29) for each reader.

The book begins by discussing geographic sensibilities; those atavistic inheritances that allows one to know how to operate and find one’s way in geographic space. Bunkse relates the development of these skills to his childhood experiences of fleeing Russian tanks, living in a German slave labor camp, and immigrating to the United States. His sense of curiosity and the need to obtain basic supplies, such as milk for his baby brother, drove him to find his way through places where he was unfamiliar and, in many cases, did not speak the language. Vivid descriptions facilitate the author’s explanation of geographic sensibilities.

Moving forward, Bunkse broaches the subject landscapes and how one understands them. Landscapes are learned not only through direct observation, but through literature, poetry, and painting. The author relates the beautiful and the sublime to his return to the farm of his childhood, many years later as the Soviet Union was disintegrating. Following the theme of home and road, Bunkse explains why one cannot go home again, using his experiences in Latvia as a Fulbright scholar as a backdrop. What was once his homeland was now a place full of people speaking Russian and reminders of the influence of communism. For the author, after many years away, the road was of more comfort than his childhood home.

Straying from the ideas of landscape and homeland, Bunkse next discusses the paradigm of traveler and tourist. For the author, the traveler is one who attempts to engage with the landscape he or she is visiting, to become more than an observer. The ultimate goal of the traveler is to become an accepted participant in the culture. The tourist, conversely, merely observes and remains distant from the native population. He or she visits the prescribed sites and follows a prepackaged itinerary. The author claims that humans need to be both travelers and tourists. While the traveler’s task is intense and difficult, the tourist is at ease. Bunkse argues that one cannot always be so engaged in the landscape as a traveler and occasionally needs the passivity of tourism.

The author wraps up his autobiography and discourse on geography as art by looking at the notion of home from a philosophical perspective. He introduces Bachelard’s theory of intimate immensity and how Bunkse’s entire experience has been a search for a dwelling that provides both an intimate and safe space that grounds him and a connection to the immensity of the cosmos. The concluding chapter establishes Bachelard’s theory in terms of Bunkse’s own home. It provides the final stamp on the story of home and road. After years of finding security in constant movement, the author constructs a home in an actual structure where he is at peace.

The genius of Bunkse’s book is one that keeps its single flaw from being fatal. It is a book that can be read on multiple levels. It is both an autobiography of a life consumed by the childhood experiences of World War II and also a more deeply engaging work about geography and life and geography as art. When delving for the deeper meaning, the text becomes more obtuse. This is perhaps the composition’s only flaw. Bunkse incorporates many references to literature, history, and philosophy. At times he fleshes out the connections to his argument well, while in other instances the reference is made without explanation. Those seeking the more profound meaning in Bunkse’s words may find it necessary to research several characters and writings mentioned throughout. For those who simply want to enjoy the vibrant imagery of the author’s narrative, a story of childhood and World War II in the Baltic States as it shaped his future path as a geographer, Geography and the Art of Life will prove to be a stimulating experience.
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