

Gary Snyder and the Literature of Energy

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The way up [culture] and down [nature] is one and the same. (75)

—Heraclitus

The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us
The expression, *animal life*, is nearly synonymous with the expression, *animal heat* . . . (734)

—Thoreau, *Walden*

Energy, most familiar to us as the essential heat of life that Thoreau speaks of, and upon which his “economy” at Walden Pond is based, pervades the bodies of all living things. Thus it also pervades Environmental Science as something more than a mere “subject” to be studied. Every life form, human or non-human, depends on the steady, constant, continuous inflow (and outflow) of energy, most obviously embodied in the acts of breathing and eating; without this, all living organisms will first become weakened and then, in the end, extinct.

As “life” writing, the literature of energy crosses boundaries, traversing or transversing (like transverse waves) the human and natural sciences.¹ If we think of it in terms of Marx’s forces and relations of production, we might say that energy is what “drives” whole societies, whole cultures, although especially as it has been harnessed by the instruments of capitalism in recent centuries, these are also forces which destroy nature in transforming it. For Freud we think first of libido, the “sexual energy” (in the widest sense) of the unconscious, and indeed for Freud “civilization is repression”; on the other hand, “countries have attained a high level of civilization if we find that in them everything which can assist in the exploitation of the earth by man and in his protection against the forces of nature—everything, in short, which is of use to him—is attended to and effectively carried out” (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 92). In other words, more clearly in Freud—who had the advantage of living in the 20th century—than in Marx or Nietzsche (whose “will to power” also comes to mind in the context of an all-pervading “life-energy”), the thriving of human technology and of a technology-based society and culture depend on finding energy sources and using them, and this in turn means the denaturalization of nature.

In this paper I will attempt to elucidate Gary Snyder’s observation that a “culture of wilderness” is still needed. More radical in his critique of civilization than Freud, of course,

¹ I want to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Scott Slovic, because my title is inspired by the talk he gave on “The Literature of Energy” at Tamkang University in 2006. Special thanks also go to Prof. Anthony Hunt, who taught a summer seminar on Gary Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers without End* at Tamkang University in April 2002.

Snyder could almost be more easily compared with the Deleuze and Guattari of *Anti-Oedipus*, who begin by throwing out the whole Freudian “economy” based on the parents-child triangle and speak rather of the multiplicity (thus molecular non-humanness) of/within each living organism. Snyder, through his poetry, essays, and reviews, spares no effort in showing us how a human-all-too-human narcissistic culturalism is inevitably grounded in the “denaturalization of nature.”

I. Two Patterns of Energy: Food Chains and Oil Flows

Snyder is a poet of compassion. In order to “bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency” (*Turtle Island* 106), he not only speaks of and for the non-human other, but also proclaims that “I am a poet” and that “My teachers are other poets, American Indians, and a few Buddhist priests in Japan” (*Turtle Island* 106).

In Snyder’s hands there are two kinds of energy poetry: one speaks to the ecology of the food chain, as we see in “Old Bones” and “Song of the Taste”; the other is oil poetry, examples of which include “Oil,” “Instructions,” “Boat of a Million Years,” and “Energy is Eternal Delight”—the title refers of course to Blake’s “Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” “Old Bones” makes clear the vital role of food within nature’s larger “energy chain” by showing us how (non-) humans’ search for food is a basic matter of “life and death” (“What we ate—who ate what— / how we all prevailed”): “*Out there* walking round, looking out for food . . . / no food *out there* on dusty slopes of scree— / . . . / *Out there* somewhere / a shrine for the old ones, / the dust of the old bones, / old songs and tales. / What we ate—who ate what— / how we all prevailed (*Mountains and Rivers* 10, emphasis mine). The use here of *epanaphora* (the “repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses”) expands the sense of “out there” by emphasizing its essential indeterminacy with respect to “precise location.” In this poem temporal-spatial dualism is also collapsed, along with other dualisms.

In “Song of the Taste,” Snyder again explores the sense in which nature, as a vast multiplicity, “eats itself”: “*Eating* each other’s seeds / *Eating* / Ah, each other” (*Regarding Wave* 17). The main thrust of this energy poem is “eating” which, as in “Old Bones,” is not at all romanticized. The final epiphany of the speaker occurs when an ecosystem needs “[e]ating each other’s seeds / Eating / Ah, each other” so as to facilitate energy exchange (*Back on the Fire* 68). Ecologically speaking, the first source of food is the primal energy that generates it, the sun’s energy, the photosynthesis that renders food possible. Thus Snyder speaks through the trees and other non-humans about how important the sun/light/photosynthesis is in his “The Uses of Light” (“I take it into me and grow / Say the trees / Leaves above / Roots below” (*Turtle Island* 39). While revisiting the Marxian “labor” theory of value, Snyder argues that organic nature still plays a *vital* role on the grounds that “green plants doing photosynthesis are the ultimate working class.”

Historically, there are four major energy forms: (1) *coal*, (2) *oil*, (3) *natural gas*, and (4)

nuclear energy, where concerns with the second and fourth have tended to drive geopolitical policies since the time of World War II, and still drive them, most obviously now in the Middle East. Hence we also get Snyder's "oil poetry." In the Introductory Note to *Turtle Island*, Snyder says clearly that his poems "speak of *place*, and the *energy*-pathways that sustain *life*. Each living being is a swirl in the *flow*, a formal turbulence, a 'song.' The *land*, the *planet* itself, is also a *living being*—at another pace . . . Hark again to those *roots*, to see our ancient *solidarity* . . ." (i, emphasis mine). In "Oil," Snyder describes with fear and anxiety the replacement of "first nature" with that "second nature" (artificial nature) supported and powered by the fossil-fuel oil: "the ship burns with a furnace heart / steam veins and copper nerves / quivers and slightly twists and always goes—" (*Back Country* 20). The "ship" carrying oil to various consumer nations could itself also be the "ship of state," with veins of "steam" and nerves of "copper," itself "hooked" on (addicted to) the very drug it carries, like a heavy "oil drinker" or "oil addict" (oil as alcohol but also as heroin, which is injected directly into the veins, just as petroleum is extracted from veins deep within the earth.).

In "Energy Is Eternal Delight," Snyder again shows his dissatisfaction with a Western civilization whose social, political, and economic power relies on "progress": "We look to the future with pleasure / we need no fossil fuel / *get power within* / grow strong on less" (*Turtle Island* 77; emphasis mine). This notion of "getting power within" echoes a theme in Snyder's Zen-poem "Without" in *Turtle Island*: "the silence / of nature / within. / *the power within.* / the power / without / the path is whatever passes—no / end in itself. / . . . / *Singing* / the proof / the proof of *the power within*" (*Turtle Island* 6). This "inner energy" is what we want, not the "external" sort. "Without" is a condensed energy poem packed with rich ecological meanings; it deals with the way of nature and its powers. There is a remote association here with Arthur's Waley's famous translation of Laozi's Daodejing, *The Way and Its Power* (1958), which of course opens with the line, "The Tao (Way, Path) that can be Tao-ed is not the constant Tao" (which has several translations and interpretations). According to Waley, "Tao [the Way] was something that was at the same time within and without, for in Tao all opposites are blended, all contrasts harmonized" (52). In the context of the poem, "without" means the "external" forces running across "the silence of nature," like those two forces, both autonomous and heteronomous, that cause the ripples in "Ripples on the Surface." In "Without" the two powers—the power *within* and the power *without*—run through the landscape and/or through the speaker's consciousness. The focal point of the poem is the *path*, the *way* on (over, through) which the two powers pass, leaving perhaps only a trace or empty form, a Taoist "empty vessel" (*kong hsin*, empty mind-heart). We might thus think this Tao-Path connects inside and outside yet returns us always to the inside, where there is inner life-energy, "singing," in spite of the fact that (ironically perhaps) the poem's title is "Without." Near the poem's end we get "healing" and "saving" as two practices of the wild,

here clearly associated more with an Eastern than with a Western (Christian) context.

II. The Poet in the Landscape

In “Covers the Ground,” Snyder cites naturalist John Muir: “When California was wild, it was one sweet bee-garden” Here the poet observes the drastic change that has taken place in the California landscape due to the *covering* of the ground, the *filling* of the once-beautiful natural space by all the man-made, somehow ugly and superfluous detritus. Yet, mixed with all this “crap”—and here even the clouds are “dust clouds” (polluted clouds)—we do get “cypress tree spires, frizzy lonely palm tree” (“frizzy” suggests the weakness of a tree that is “lonely” amidst all this artificial stuff) and, more strikingly at the end, “spring fur of green weed [that] comes on last fall’s baked ground.” In this poem, Snyder invites the reader to *visualize* the passage from “nature” to “culture” of the central California landscape. The selfless Snyderian speaker resembles the Shepardian “man in the landscape” whose “I”/eye becomes the source or locus of vision that alone can give objective meaning to the *other*, the nonhuman.

What, then, is the meaning of “landscape” as we get it in these poems? We might say Snyder’s landscape is marked not only by topographical and geographical features but also by plant and animal “knowledge,” by images of the human and non-human—where the latter term can suggest artificial (man-made) things as well as rocks, mountains, trees and bears. Narratives of landscape inevitably portray the interactions between and among humans and the surrounding natural world. In Snyder’s poetry, the anonymous man/poet *in* the landscape serves as an objective translator of the *other*, translating through visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory and gustatory images which in themselves can generate multiple layers of ecopoetic meaning.

Snyder’s “The Canyon Wren” is about a boat ride down the Stanislaus River. The poet in the landscape—“I look up at the cliffs / But we’re swept on by downriver / The rafts / Wobble and slide over roils of water”—observes a hawk that “cuts across that narrow sky hit by sun” and then hears the twittering of a wren. In this poem, Snyder weaves together natural, ornithological and Zen-Buddhist descriptions, and ends with the lines: “These songs that are here and gone, / Here and gone, / To purify our ears” (*Mountains and Rivers without End* 91). Here the speaker already knows that the Stanislaus River, which comes out of the central Sierras in California, will be dammed/damned. This man/poet in the landscape therefore inscribes the experience of his final visit to the “twists and turns of the river, the layering, swirling stone cliffs of the gorges” (161). The sadness here, the “elegiac” tone is reminiscent of that in Ed Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*: “Finally a word of caution: Do not jump into your automobile In the first place you can’t see *anything* from a car In the second place most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial” (xiv). The real becomes the historical, and natural beauty that

is lost, wildlife that has died or disappeared can only be remembered or imagined (as by a poet). But if Snyder remembers the wren as he had once heard it in the first part of the poem, this wren will later speak for itself in and through the poem: “ti ti ti ti tee tee tee . . .” In an interesting variation on the Romantic poets, for instance on Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” this singing from *within nature* (in the poem “Without”) has the healing power (the Taoist power) to “purify our ears,” even if it is now only the remembered music of the past.

Thus in “Old Woodrat’s Stinky House” Snyder also lets the old coyote speak, giving us humans a kind of “moral lesson” about the dangers of polluting our (and his, their) environment. Coyote Old Man, like the part-time narrator Nanapush in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*, is a “trickster,” a carrier of knowledge, a rebel, a survivor (*Back on the Fire* 45). He flouts the boundary between good and evil, alerts us to the fact that “wisdom and foolishness are often mingled hopelessly together like ghee stirred into milk” (*Back on the Fire* 45), and points out that “place,” “landscape,” “bioregionism,” “nature,” and “environment” belong to the same group, denoting “that which is” (*Back on the Fire* 30).

III. Toward a Nonharming Ecological Mind

In Section 3 of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud infers from his presupposed anthropocentric perspective that human suffering comes from three sources: (1) “the superior power of nature”; (2) the “feebleness” of humans’ bodies; and (3) “the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society” (86). The main argument of this book is of course “the irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization” (60). For Freud, “the word ‘civilization’ describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes—namely to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relationships” (89). However, Freud’s equation of culture with “the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors” obviously carries a strong sense of anthropocentrism, as does his presupposition that “[w]e recognize as cultural all activities and resources which are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them, for protecting them against the violence of the forces of nature” (90). Judging by Freud’s ideas of “culture,” “the violence of the forces of nature,” and “justice,” we find that he sets culture and nature in a pattern of opposition and regards nature as the “windmill” that propels or drives culture, and “justice” as something that is relevant only to culture.

In *The Natural Contract* (1995) Michel Serres, like Snyder, assumes that an over-emphasis on humanism reflects our cultural narcissism. Against the backdrop of the Enlightenment conception of a “social contract” which manifests a “human, all too human,” exclusively anthropocentric form of thinking, the “natural contract” would be based on the symbiosis or reciprocity of humans and the natural environment. Serres argues that the Earth

can speak to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, that these are already enough to make not just contact but a contract with the human world, and that each of the partners in such a symbiosis owes, by rights, its very life to the other. Thus the “social contract” that recognizes only human signatories—“legal subjects”—should be extended to include natural and even virtual subjects.

With Snyder we will think here of Taoism, Hinduism and various forms of Buddhism (not only Chan or Zen). We will think of *ahimsa*, the first of the five ethical practices, the others being truthfulness (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), continence (*brahmacharya*), and noncovetousness (*aparigraha*), which are practiced in “thought, word, and deed” (*Encyclopedia* 423). In Sanskrit, “a-” means “not,” and “*himsa*” means “injury,” thus the word’s original meaning denoting “nonharming,” “abstinence from injury of any living creature through thought, word, or deed” (5). For Snyder, “the most important single ethical teaching of the Buddhist tradition is nonviolence toward all of nature, *ahimsa* (Japanese, *fusessho*.)” In “Writers and the War against Nature,” the poet expands this term’s meaning to include the “respect for all beings,” not just “other living beings” (*Back on the Fire* 69), an ethical notion also shared in the “Abrahamic religions” (67).

In “Ecology, Literature, and the New World Disorder,” Snyder concludes that “When we come to the field of ecology we are looking at population dynamics, plant and animal succession, predator-prey relationships, competition and cooperation, feeding levels, food chains, whole ecosystems, and the flow of energy through ecosystems . . .” (*Back on the Fire* 30). Snyder is especially concerned with “the inner energy of an ecosystem” as well as “the dark side of nature—nocturnal, parasitic energies of decomposition and their human parallels” (31): to give life and to *undo* harm (*The Practice of the Wild* 182). The literature of energy, the poetry of energy is a part of that vast and on-going, inter-species energy-exchange that we call “ecology.” One reason Snyder’s eco-poetic vision is “sustainable” is because it is repeatedly expressed anew in his poetry and other writings, and in the poetry and other writings of those who have been influenced by him, absorbed the heat of his inner-outer writing, his intense eco-poetic “energy.”