

“Reading Miyazawa Kenji and Gary Snyder from the Viewpoint of the Place of Nothingness”

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In this presentation, I would like to clarify the way Gary Snyder writes his essays and poems from the viewpoint of the “now, here,” in connection with his Zen Buddhist influences, by referring to the thought of Nishida Kitaro.

Kenichi Noda argues that the sense and viewpoint of the “now, here” is missing in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. He further compares Thoreau with Annie Dillard, concluding that Thoreau kept excluding the present moment of “now, here” which Dillard sought. (*Walden*, 828) Noda explains this difference by referring to Lawrence Buell’s *Environmental Imagination*, pointing out that Thoreau has a tendency to pastoralize the time and place of New England by applying the image of Ancient Europe to it and regards it as a sense of verbal colonization. Whether the sense and viewpoint of “now, here” is really missing in the writings of Thoreau is still arguable, but his act of pastoralizing time and the place may reflect his reception of romanticism.

How about Snyder? Compared with Thoreau, Snyder rather seems to see things through the viewpoint of “now, here” because the very moment he observes is actually focused and depicted in many of his poems and essays. For example, toward the end of the poem, “The Mountain Spirit” is the following passage:

Mountains will be Buddhas then

When — bristlecone needles are green!

Scarlet penstemon

Flowers are red” (*Mountains and Rivers without End*, 145-6)

Snyder confirms mountains as Buddhas not by pastoralizing them with reference to Asian historical allusions and classics but by the present color of the needles and flowers. Another example can be found in the poem, “On as for Poet”: “Water is creation, the mud we crawled on, the wash of tides in the cells.” (*Turtle Island*, 114) Here Snyder does not attribute water to a legendary European river, such as the Lethe, but to the actual world of interrelatedness between water circulation and life in the eco-system.

Why does Snyder concentrate his attention on what is before him? His disbelief in Western civilization may allow him to avoid assumptions acquired from his Western background. In his essay, *Practice of the Wild*, Snyder regards the Western civilization as monotheistic and exclusive, and insists that its history therefore has separated humans from nature and exploited nature. Another reason is that Snyder supports his opinion with pantheistic Asian thoughts. In his essay, *Earth House Hold*, Snyder introduced the fact that ancient Japanese always saw things as they are. (*Earth House Hold*, 143) We also find a part of the Avantamsaka Sutra explaining that all “sentient beings are the roots of the tree-of-awakening” and therefore “the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas” are depicted as not abstract ideas but “the flowers and fruits.” This appears in the poem

‘With This Flesh’ (*Mountains and Rivers without End*, 75).

I would like to speculate why Snyder applies Buddhist visions to his writings. Buddhism gives us the ability to see things as they are step by step. First, it urges us to focus on the present phenomena, “now, here.” Secondly, by doing this, we can shed human perceptions and therefore can restore our abilities to see things as they are. Thirdly, as a result, we can recapture this world as the ecosystem.

Let me clarify this process with an example. The words of Dogen quoted by Snyder explain the first step. “When you find your place where you are, practice occurs.” (*Practice of the Wild*, 25) To detach any assumptions, we find our time and place where we are. This is the state of nonattachment in Zen practice. What we find here is the actual world where actual beings dwell: the ecosystem.

Nishida Kitaro, one of the foremost modern Japanese philosophers, tried to clarify Asian thought using Western theories and terminology. Nishida explains this as follows: “what is really existing should have unreasonableness at its bottom” (*Nishida Kitaro Zenshu*, 6-3) Here what he means by “unreasonableness” indicates that actual being should include its non-beingness. Nishida regards this contradiction as natural in the actual world. His theory becomes logical if it is in the discussion of life, because a life is not the same as the one it was yesterday. All beings in this actual world used not to exist, now exist, but will not exist in the future. When I hit my head with my hand, thousands of cells die. I am not the same as I was yesterday, in terms of the difference of thousands of cells. In the actual world nothing remains the same. Nishida explains the actual world we live as the world of “Engi,” (a Buddhist referring to interdependency) where every being repeats its creation and annihilation at every moment. According to Nishida, “the every moment of ourselves is life as well as death.” (*Nishida Kitaro Zenshu*, 6-204) This is the actual world Snyder focuses on in his writings.

Snyder’s idea of bioregionalism advocates the importance of shedding human perceptions and restoring our abilities to see things as they are. It is for us to re-inhabit in the ecosystem, as members of it. The poem “Jackrabbit” suggests its importance. In this poem, Snyder depicts his encounter with a rabbit and explains that the jackrabbit knows humans a lot more than humans know it. (*Mountains and Rivers without End*, 31) He doesn’t give us any reason why he thinks so, but his emphasis on the large ears of this rabbit suggests the retrogression of our five senses caused by living in civilization. Here the rabbit must be watching Snyder at the risk of its life, with keenly honed senses.

To re-inhabit the ecosystem is to put humans into the system of the food chain. To maintain our life in the ecosystem, we are always obliged to keep our senses sharp in order to encounter other beings at the risk of our lives. Snyder illustrates his experience of being watched by cougars or coyotes in the darkness in the poem, ‘Piute Creek.’ (*Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*,

8) They are pricking their ears and sniffing him as their prey. Here the world appears as an ecosystem where all beings, including humans, live their lives with a life-or-death struggle.

Every being has its bioregion for its center, and at the same time it is watched by other beings for their prey in its surroundings.¹ The tension we experience in reading Snyder's writings comes from these relationships between beings. To focus on the very moment of "now, here" is "to live." "Now, here" is the time and place where "engi" works; every being repeats its creation and annihilation at every moment. The world is, by nature, a "demoniac" world.

Works Cited

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¹ Cf. Nishida explains the actual world as "a circle without circumference whose center is everywhere, ... and its surrounding is filled with demoniac" (*Nishida Kitaro Tetsugaku Ronshu*, 336) Here "demoniac" suggests the existence of other beings at the risk of our lives.