

Envisioning a Planetary Future: Gary Snyder and Japan, 1951-2007

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Commenting on Snyder's early synthesis of Buddhism and North American indigenous cultures, John Elder states: "The synthesis in his own life and art between the two ancient cultures is itself a basis for hope: North American vision, like the Dharma, may be transmitted and developed in cultural contexts different from its origins" (45). I agree with this remark, and I want to discuss how this cross-cultural vision, "a basis for hope," unfolds itself in Snyder's poetry and prose from 1951 to 2006. My interests also include other elements that Snyder brings into this cross-cultural space. Consequently, I am less interested in merely identifying Japanese perspectives in Snyder's works (although this issue is unavoidable and only informed discussions of details guarantee valid textual assessment) than in how Japanese or East Asian elements contribute to creating a cross-culturality, which ultimately constitutes the core of his vision for a sustainable planetary future. In other words, it is the process of the formation of this cross-culturality and its function in Snyder's work as it is used to subvert and dismantle the received assumptions concerning the human and the nonhuman that is of main interest in my presentation.

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Before his departure to Japan in 1956, Snyder worked in the forest in the west, and based on this experience he wrote *Myths and Texts* (1960). He records the destruction of the forest that he himself participated. But his gaze does not stop at the surface and penetrates deeper into anthropocentrism that informs such an attitude and brought about a crisis, and his search for the location of humanity in his early poetry and prose is intense.

The location of humanity in "Piute Creek," (a poem written before his departure to Japan) especially in the second stanza, is noteworthy:

A clear, attentive mind
Has no meaning but that
which sees is truly seen.
No one loves rock, yet we are here.
Night chills. A flick
In the moonlight
Slips into Juniper shadow:
Back there unseen
Cold proud eyes
Of Cougar or Coyote
Watch me rise and go. (Riprap 8)

The process depicted in this now famous poem is three-fold: suppression of the dualistic mind, a monistic, revelatory moment in the natural environment, and the reemergence from that moment. The speaker in this poem is part of the wilderness, not presiding, but acknowledging reciprocity and placing himself as another entity in the vast natural order. Wendell Berry observes that the speaker is "present in the poem finally as another creature, along with moon and rock and juniper and the wild animals" (423). The speaker thus does not obtrude; he remains hidden in the breathing communal whole. His reference to himself as a separate presence occurs only in the last line, and humanity in this poem functions not as a dominant subject but as an

object continually located and arrested in the gaze of the natural others hidden in the wilderness. A mind rendered free from an impulse for anthropocentric imposition appears to reciprocate "seeing" with nature ("A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen"). A close reading of the second stanza, however, reveals that the act of "seeing" is predominantly possessed by the natural others, and Snyder seems to place emphasis on the mind's sudden realization that natural others are also capable of dispossessing humanity of its privilege of "seeing." The speaker on the other hand is not able to locate either "Cougar or Coyote" in his gaze; instead, he intuits their "unseen" presence in his back and allows himself to be located in their cold, proud gaze. This is a subversive moment, in which the speaker disavows his dominant gaze and reverses the role of humanity as the controller of external nature, acknowledging a reciprocal relation with nonhumans co-existing in this shared natural space.

In "Piute Creek," the poet asks a questions, a questioning that takes place in terms of humanity's relation with the nonhuman others. The syntactical position of humanity at the end of the poem and the absence of the capital "I" clearly indicate the speaker's move away from anthropocentrism and implicit questions of his isolated identity. In other words, the speaker sees his identity as it is arrested in the gaze of nonhumans. The ontological question is embedded in the syntax that avoids the use of the Romantic "I" and the subsequent decision to place the subjectivity in the position that is the extreme opposite of its Romantic location. A seminal vision—Buddhism and an ecological awareness blended with Snyder's knowledge of the back country and indigenous cultures rooted in the Western American wilderness—thus emerges as a principle for transcending the dualistic, destructive mind. Seeing animals and plants as other living entities interdependent with humanity takes place as well in such a poem as "Burning the Small Dead" (included in *The Back Country* but actually written in the early 1950s) and those included in *Myths and Texts*. (For a detailed discussion, see Yamazato, 98-102, 117-119).

Seen in this way, Snyder's sojourn in Japan and Asia (1956-68) can be seen as a provisional stage in which he attempted to synthesize Buddhism, North American Indigenous cultures, and ecology. For Gary Snyder, his quest in East Asia, especially in Japan, was also supported by another far-reaching purpose: "The Frontier-type Wobbly-Thoreau anarchism is in my blood, i.e., that's my own tradition, I was raised up in it. So put it with the Oriental historical depth, & I got a fulcrum to tip the whole damn civilization over with." (Letter to Philip Whalen, 9 December 1953). To study Zen with a Japanese Zen master in a meditation hall was the centrally manifested motivation to his first journey to Japan, and yet what underlay his quest was not limited only to seeking religious teaching. Although his phrase "the Oriental historical depth" is ambiguous, the passage above nevertheless implies the revolutionary, subversive nature of his sojourn in East Asia. Further, while it was in 1956 that Snyder finally went to Japan, he had been thinking for several years of the whole Asia (primarily East Asia and India, and not limited to Japan) as a terrain to be explored for "a fulcrum" which would lead him to a new, alternative culture, one spanning East and West. From the early stages of his career, he envisioned fusing diverse cultural traditions, especially those of North America and the East Asian, to create an alternative to a civilization that he found "self-destructive."

"Japan First Time Around," a series of journal entries included in *Earth House Hold* (1969), reflects how Snyder developed his ideas during his early sojourn in Japan. Buddhism and ecology "cross-fertilize" each other well. Eugene P. Odum points out a key concept in ecology: "All units of the ecosystem are mutually dependent. This is a good point to keep in mind when we are tempted to extol the importance of some group of organisms in which we happen to be especially interested" (79). Humanity is "a part of complex 'biological' cycles," dependent on the food web of eating and being eaten (Odum 12). Snyder was deeply aware of this key concept of ecology in his early stage, as in "Japan First Time Around," in which he sketches the link in the chain "salts—diatoms—copepods—herring—fisherman—us. eating" (EHH 31). It is clear, then, that Snyder in Japan deepened and strengthened his conviction that Buddhism and ecology shared a vision of the world in terms of the interrelatedness of all beings. The former is a picture of a spiritual world caught in the

Asian religious vision, and the latter a model of the natural world presented by the rational thinking of Euro-American science. During his first sojourn in Japan (1956-57), Snyder discovered the connection between Zen and the Avatamsaka teachings: "So, Zen being founded on Avatamsaka, and the net-network of things" (EHH 34). And three short months later, the shared imagery of the Avatamsaka sutra and the principles of ecology were fused in his mind. On October 24, 1956, he writes in his journal: "Indra's net is not merely two-dimensional. . . . --two days contemplating ecology, food-chains and sex" (EHH 38). This is a significant moment of expansion in Snyder's cross-culturality when two essential elements in Snyder's vision are being fused.

Snyder's deepening Buddhist views and ecological ideas are represented in such poems as "Kyoto Born in Spring Song" and "Song of the Taste," which he wrote in the late 1960s and collected in *Regarding Wave* (1970). One of the most conspicuous efforts manifested in Snyder's poetry and prose is to obliterate the differentiating line between humanity and natural beings by employing myths and folktales he found useful to this purpose. "Kyoto Born in Spring Song" is an excellent example of this endeavor. Humans and animals coexist harmoniously in this cosmos, and by calling those born in spring "babies" and "children," humans and animals alike, Snyder obliterates the differentiating line. These babies and children appear conspicuously in Japanese folklore.

Destroying such a line ultimately suggests that humanity inescapably participate in the food chain of eating and being eaten, however well it is disguised and concealed in daily life. "Song of the Taste" thus reflects the poet's deep meditation on life and celebrates eating of "each other" as a sacrament, a potlatch in which every entity becomes food to sustain life and the cosmic energy flow. In "The Song of the Taste," for instance, the world in Snyder's ecological-Buddhist view is rendered full of love, even an erotic one, out of the profound veneration for life sustained by taking (or giving) life: "Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread: / lip to lip" (RW 17). This ecological insight is an answer that Snyder gave to his own questioning of his location in the food chain, a question he asked in the middle of the Pacific in 1956 on his way to Japan. Based on this insight, Snyder further developed his ideas on humanity and nonhuman others. In "Survival and Sacrament," an essay included in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), for example, he quotes a Buddhist grace that he and his family say before meals: "We venerate the Three Treasures [teachers, the wild, and friends] / And are thankful for this meal / The work of many people / And the sharing of other forms of life" (185). Further, in "A Village Council of All Beings," an essay included in *A Place in Space* (1995), Snyder points out that "many living beings live by eating other beings," and adds: "Our bodies—or the energy they represent—are thus continually being passed around. We are all guests at the feast, and we are also the meal!" (77). These quotations reveal the ethical, spiritual depth that his poetry and prose attained after 1968, and, conversely, they suggest the significance of his years in Japan which enabled him to expand his unique cross-cultural space, a continual process in which diverse cultural elements become fused to form a practicable vision for a planetary future. The cultural syncretization that Snyder developed in Japan is, first and foremost, characterized by its complex fusion of Buddhism and ecology, which manifests its initial full development in *Turtle Island* (1974). The ethical and political dimensions that arise from the fusion of these two elements disavow the impulse to alienate and dominate other cultures, and this cross-cultural vision contains a community in which the human and the nonhuman meet without inequality and imbalance.

Snyder has shown that there is a line to be obliterated, that is, the line between the human and the nonhuman, and, as I have attempted to show in this essay, this is the anthropocentric line that he has grappled with in the cross-cultural space. When at the beginning of the twenty-first century advanced industrialized nations such as the United States and Japan reveal ruptures of this form of civilization calling for the urgent need to address constellation of environmental problems, Snyder's poetry and prose show the potential ("a fulcrum") for humanity to cross the anthropocentric line to finally "reinhabit in good spirit" in "this mosaic of

wild gardens.” If the year 1956, when he first left for Japan, marked a distinct beginning of his cross-cultural project, then the publication of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* in 1996, forty years after the first cross-cultural step was taken, meant the climax of one significant segment in Snyder's ongoing career.

Gary Snyder has stated that he would like to think of "a new definition of democracy that would include the nonhuman, that would have representation from those spheres." This is what he meant by "an ecological conscience" (TI, "The Wilderness," 106), a concept that extended Aldo Leopold's idea of land ethic by bringing in the Buddhist-Ecological-Native American view of life. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder states that "the 'proper study of mankind' is what it means to be human" (68). Out of his fusion of Buddhism and Western culture, Snyder has created a new literature, which we might call "Earth Literature." It is a kind of poetics, as he states in *Back on the Fire* (2007), that by deleting the national borders attempts to envision a sustainable future for the planet Earth: "In this time of New World Disorder, we need to find the trick of weaving civilized culture and wild nature into the fabric of the future. This will take both art and science" (25). His vision of new humanity transcends the geographical and political borders of North America, and in the present ecological crisis that both humans and nonhumans face, the implications of this "posthumanist" (Practice 68), "postnational" view of the planet Earth are deeply significant.

Snyder embodies what Lawrence Buell calls major ingredients of "an environmentally oriented work" (7-8), and he certainly represents a group of American eco-poets identified by Leonard M Scigaj (11-13). But what is absent from the analyses of these American critics is a detailed discussion of Snyder's cross-culturality, which seems to me informs the core of this poet's work. To be able to grapple unwaveringly with the fundamental problems of an age and suggest a valid, world-relevant answer is a mark of a great poet. I think Gary Snyder has done this by criss-crossing the Pacific, and his voice will continue to inspire and teach his readers in the planetary scale.

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