

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF GARY SNYDER'S SELECT POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Born in 1930, Gary Snyder's earliest years witnessed a sharp decline in idealistic thought as a result of the dominance of modernist movements. The present article deals with Snyder's idealistic vision of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. It investigates the ecological implications in his major poetic works, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1959), *Turtle Island* (1974) and *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996). I will read those works from an ecological point of view to draw the attention of the readers to the significance of the environmental concerns embodied in the poetic works of Gary Snyder.

Keywords: ecology, nature, interdependence, nonhuman, ecopoetry.

People's awareness of the ecological aspect of the universe may go back more than five centuries, specifically to the rise of western civilization in the seventeenth century. Technological inventions and scientific discoveries were all directed towards achieving human control over the natural environment. It is the German scientist Ernst Haeckel who first coined the term "ecology" ("Ökologie") in 1866. Ecology deals with organisms and their environment. It consists of all living beings, the natural surroundings in which they live, and their relationship to it. Haeckel defined it as "the study of all environmental conditions of existence" (Worster, 1977, p. 192).

Snyder believes that nature is constituted of microscopic organisms, animals, plants and human societies. He calls for the protection of nature from the damages of civilization and urges humans to be in touch with their "wild" selves and return to a sense of union with nature. Although Snyder belongs to the school of deep ecology, his interests also associate him with social ecology. Social ecology is mainly concerned with the debate between forms of power in the human world, and how this leads to the control of nature. It stresses that the solution to human destruction on nonhuman nature is a social one while deep ecology is more concerned with changing human consciousness as it draws from religious and philosophical attitudes. Snyder concurs with both, emphasizing the need to change consciousness while endorsing social changes to harmonizing human's relationship to nonhuman nature.

Snyder's ecological views are derived from certain traditional beliefs taken from Indian culture, Buddhism and other contemporary beliefs. Snyder looks at the earth as a 'mother' to living beings. This image is repeatedly seen in his book *Turtle Island* (1974). According to Snyder, the relationship between the earth and living beings should be motherly since the earth is like a mother that provides its inhabitants with food, water and air. Earth, therefore, deserves the respect of its children and their protection. More significantly, Snyder believes in the interdependence of all life forms on earth; this concept seems to be considerably derived from Buddhism. Snyder shares the Buddhist belief in the interrelation of all living beings not only on a spiritual level as Buddhism saw it, but also on a biological and physical level as shown in the food chain. Humankind, for Snyder, is a transient form with particular characteristics like spirit and energy among various forms of living beings but not superior to others as humans are only a part of them. To survive, mankind should keep the diversity of those forms of life because their extinction would threaten human life on the planet. Snyder (1974, p.103) states:

The treasure of life is the richness of stored information in the diverse genes of all living beings. If the human race, following on some set of catastrophes, were to survive at the expense of many plant and animal species, it would be no victory. Diversity provides life with the capacity for a multitude of adaptations and responses to long-range changes on the planet.

This variety may make adaptation to unexpected problems such as natural catastrophes or climate change more possible. For Snyder, the extinction of any living being, no matter plant or animal, inevitably weakens the earth's natural stability and leads to deadly consequences on the environment. Civilization and its indifference to ecology is a fundamental component in Snyder's view of the natural world. Snyder (1974, p.107) writes:

At the root of the problem where our civilization goes wrong is the mistaken belief that nature is something less than authentic, that nature is not as alive as man is, or as intelligent, that in a sense it is dead, and that animals are of so low an order of intelligence and feeling, we need not take their feelings into account.

The sense of superiority humans have over other elements of nature can be seen in civilized legislation which allows the killing of nonhuman beings. This, according to Snyder, is considered a crime. Modern civilization, Snyder remarks, deprives people of the natural world and impedes people from being conscious of its significance to their survival: "They buy vegetables in the supermarket, but do not think about the soil these grow in" (Snyder, 1980, p.3).

Snyder is frequently referred to as an ecopoet. He was not so much interested in producing a delightful portrayal of nature as he was in improving his relationship with ecology. As J. Scott Bryson (2002, pp.5-6) points out, there are two main features of ecopoetry. The first is an "ecocentric perspective" where

the focus of attention is not only humanity but also the natural world. The second feature is that a poem should establish a new consciousness of defending the natural environment. It is not humanity but nature which is superior and should be defended and respected.

Having lived his childhood in the Pacific Northwest, Gary Snyder began to develop deep feelings towards the natural world at an early age which later characterized his poetic style. Snyder developed his ecological vision of poetry as a way of stimulating positive changes in the ecological world order, which may help to preserve life on this planet. Additionally, Snyder's great interest in Buddhism contributed significantly to his involvement with environmental issues as he found considerable correspondence between Buddhism and environmentalism. Buddhism desires to achieve loving kindness, sympathetic joy and serenity not only to human beings but to all things in the universe. Being unkind to the planet and its inhabitants opposes Buddhist beliefs. Thus, Snyder blends religion and environmentalism in his writing. Snyder's ecological concerns that exist in his poetry and prose, therefore, come from his childhood in the Pacific Northwest, his great interest in Zen Buddhism, and his anthropological interest in the American Indians. This merging of interests led to the emergence of a writer with an activist attitude who looks at the universe as the web of a mutualistic organism.

In his earlier years, Snyder worked in the Pacific Northwest wilderness as a member of a trail crew, a fire lookout in the Cascades, and a dock worker on the San Francisco docks. Snyder's own life plays an important role in many of his works. His experience as a fire lookout on Crater Mountain in the Cascades of Washington in the summer of 1952 is central to his aesthetic and spiritual growth, whereas his work as a member of a trail crew in Yosemite National Park in the summer of 1955 inspired him to write his first book, *Riprap and the Cold mountain poems* in 1959 (Suiter, 2002, pp.1-3). Snyder's reverence to all forms of life is expressed in his poetic and prose works. He writes: "I have had a very moving, profound perception . . . that everything was alive ... and that on one level there is no hierarchy of qualities in life--- that the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life of say, an Einstein" (Snyder 1980, p.17). In fact, the concept of equality of all things in nature, that is, the life of a great genius like Einstein is not less important than the life of a stone, seemed revolutionary to many. The idea may seem unfair to us but to Snyder who has frequently been described as "the laureate of Deep Ecology," it is quite fair. Deep ecologists think that if people intend to protect the environment for all species, they must challenge and change long-held basic beliefs and attitudes about our species' place in nature. People must realize that animals, plants, and the ecosystems that sustain them have intrinsic value, that is, they are valuable apart from any instrumental value they might have for human beings. Rivers and lakes should contain clean water not just because humans need uncontaminated water for swimming and drinking, but also because fish do to survive. Deep ecologists teach respect for all forms of life and conditions that sustain life (Naess, 1973, pp. 95-100).

The opening poem of *Riprap* (1959), Snyder's first book of poetry, "Mid-August at Sourdough Lookout" presents an ecological image that indeed, was based on Zen Buddhism as well as on scientific knowledge. The poem brings both the land and the self. The density of the imagery of the first stanza suggests the smallness of the poet's humanity as opposed to "high still air."

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and the meadows
Swarms of new flies. (Snyder, 2004, p.3)

In other words, reading the poem ecologically emphasises the tiny place humans have in the hugeness of the universe. To put his ideas into practice, Snyder lived with primitive people for some time on a small Japanese island called Suwanosejima during his stay in Japan (1954-1968). Snyder presents in this poem a picture of solitariness and serenity. Living a simple life and being close to nature make the poet feel at peace. Snyder rejected the sweeping materialism of Western civilization, represented in "its unconscious desire to render the wild world tame and to bend nature to its will" (Stueding, 1976, p. 153).

The poem “Water” from *Riprap* depicts the time Snyder spent in Yosemite as a trail crew worker laying riprap:

Pressure of sun on the rockslide
Whirled me in a dizzy hop-and-step descent,
Pool of pebbles buzzed in a Juniper shadow,
Tiny tongue of a this-year rattlesnake flicked,
I leaped, laughing for little boulder-color coil---
Pounded by heat raced down the slabs to the creek
Deep tumbling under arching walls and stuck
Whole head and shoulders in the water:
Stretched full on cobble---ears roaring
Eyes open aching from the cold and faced a trout. (Snyder,
2004. p.12)

If the poem is read carefully, we can discover that Snyder places equal value between himself and other ecosystems. He does not present himself as a dominant figure but as a small part in the universe. This is shown in the last line in the poem when he is face to face with a fish. The whole poem seems to be a description of a real event but religious and ecological implications are conveyed through it. The theme Snyder emphasizes is that everything has its position in the universe and no one component is superior over others in the world.

“For All”, another poem from his later volume *Axe Handles* (1983), has the same ecological implication of equality among all living beings. Snyder calls for new loyalty, a loyalty to the land and environment more than a flag or government:

I pledge allegiance
I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island
and to the beings who thereon dwell
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all. (Snyder, 2000, p.504)

Snyder presented a new pledge which seems to be a revolutionary concept. He shifted the focus from national identity to nature. Loyalty is sworn "to the soil," "the beings" and the ecosystem. He stresses what he considers the most important characteristic of nature: the interdependence of all beings. Human beings are only implicitly mentioned and are never given superiority over other forms of life. This demonstrates once more that human beings are an essential component of the world but they are not the most important. The poem holds central parts of Snyder's ecological consciousness.

In another poem from *Riprap*, “Milton by Firelight,” Snyder warns against the decline of the natural environment:

In ten thousand years the Sierras
Will be dry and dead, home of the scorpion
Ice-scratched slabs and bent trees.
No paradise, no fall
Only the weathering land. (Snyder 2000,p.9)

The poet is concerned about the damage caused to the environment by scientific “progress” which had given man superiority over the nonhuman elements of nature. In this poem, Snyder especially displays his cosmic consciousness which he always expresses in his writing.

In a way, Snyder seems to be similar to other American nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey. However, Snyder’s idea of nature goes beyond the conventional romanticizing of it. He attempts to be objective though no description can be completely objective. Snyder immersed himself in experience and mixed the inner and outer worlds. His realism

and eco-mysticism are evident in his objective rendering of details (Steuding, 1967, pp. 40- 41). Eco-mysticism calls for contact with the sensual experiences offered by the natural world in order to strengthen our old spiritual connection to the Earth. Such a spiritual connection may sharpen people's knowledge of the environmental world and the place of humans in the ecosystem.

The publication of Pulitzer Prize winning *Turtle Island* in 1974 marked a turning point for Snyder towards the embodiment of more ecological views which made him a major spokesman of an ecological vision of the world. *Turtle Island* is divided into four sections; the first three comprise verse while the last is prose. In this work, one can see Snyder the ecologist more clearly. In *Turtle Island*, Snyder wrote verse which not only deal with ideas but "with modes of action and with the unity of interrelationships in nature, and its verification is the fullness of the environment it creates" (Altieri, 1979, p. 135).

Snyder presents a model of poetry which looks significantly different from his previous poetic works. Snyder describes his new model of poetry in an essay in *The Old Ways*, a work contemporary to *Turtle Island*:

We're just starting, in the last ten years here, to begin to make songs that will speak for plants, mountains, animals and children. When you see your first deer of the day you sing your salute to the deer, or your first red-wing blackbird—I saw one this morning! Such poetries will be created by us as we reinhabit this land with people who know they belong to it; for whom "primitive" is not a word that means past, but *primary*, and *future*... These poesies to come will help us learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with the other people—nonhuman included—brothers and sisters. (Snyder, 1977, p.42)

Snyder's words indicate that a significant change in Snyder's vision of poetry was under way. From *Turtle Island* onwards, Snyder the ecologist would appear more. Snyder stresses on the importance of being primitive to be in harmony with nature. In accordance with his ecological concerns, Snyder calls for poetry that includes man, animals and ecosystems; a kind of poetry which presents a community of human and nonhuman as "brothers and sisters." Snyder is now less concerned with spiritual states than with man's harmony with the environment. Man should know plant life, weather, soil and all knowledge needed to preserve biological life.

Turtle Island exhibits Snyder's mystical relation to land in several ways. Snyder attempts to establish a connection between his scientific language as an ecologist and his literary production. When "ecologists talk about ecology of oak communities," Snyder writes, we should understand "they are communities" and that oak and human communities "share attributes" (Snyder 1974, p 108). In other words, human beings are part of a broad community with the non-human; plants, animals and "a variety of wild life" (p.108). Snyder thinks that all things in the universe have equal value. To Snyder, "the richness and diversity of the nonhuman world only deepens felt responsibility for the human one" (Hunt 2004, p.1). Snyder's ecological vision is that nature, society and spirit are interdependent and what happens to each would inevitably affect the others. To be more specific, what happens in nature has social and spiritual effects. Thus, what happens in society has natural and spiritual consequences and what happens spiritually has social and natural results. *Turtle Island* is "evidence of Snyder's flowering social conscience and of his continuation of ministry of love and concern for one's fellow creatures and for the biosphere" (Steuding, 1976, p. 156).

Snyder also believes in the unity of cultures which can be realized through the ecological perspective that focuses on the interrelation of people. Snyder thinks that the majesty of the land would take people away from their little selves to a broader world, a world of mountains and rivers. Native American traditions as well as Buddhist traditions, which Snyder greatly admired, teach people how to go beyond of their selves. Buddhism as a philosophy was greatly admired by Snyder as it opposed materialism and does not recognize a conflict between itself and modern science. On the contrary, it holds that Buddha applied the experimental approach to the question of ultimate truth. Both Native Americans and Buddhists have an ecological understanding of interdependence and the equality of all living and nonliving "citizens" of nature (McClintock 1994, p. 121).

The opening poem of *Turtle Island*, “Anasazi” is very important as it sets the tone for the whole work. The poem shows Snyder’s interest in Native Indians for the whole poem is dedicated to the Anasazi’s tribal existence and praises the state of harmony between those primitive people and their physical environment:

Anasazi,
Anasazi,
tucked up in clefts in the cliffs
growing strict fields of corn and beans
sinking deeper and deeper in earth (Snyder 1974,p.3)

Snyder was interested in Indians since childhood. Not only did he know them through books, he lived amongst them when he was a child. The poem displays the Anasazi people as skilful at gardening, pottery making, basket weaving and architecture. They were especially admired for their villages built into the sides of steep cliffs:

Trickling streams in hidden canyons
Under the cold rolling desert
Corn-basket wide eyed
Red baby
Rock lip home,
Anasazi. (p.3)

Snyder wanted to study human life, not in isolation from other elements of nature but as an integral part of the natural world. Snyder’s belief for the need to recognize the earth itself as a living being—along with all its trees, rocks, plants, and animals including humans—is a major theme in this poem as it is in much of Snyder’s work. Throughout the poem, there is an interaction of humans, animals, plants, even sandstone and rock canyons. The poem concludes with a striking image of identification between the Indian tribe and the landscape. The poem “applies to us only insofar as we can see ourselves as products of, and preservers of, a physical environment” (Molesworth 1983, p.94).

“By Frazier Creek Falls” involves the reader in the wilderness experience. Paul (1986, p.58) wrote, “I know of no one since Thoreau who has so thoroughly espoused the wild as Gary Snyder—and no one who is so much its poet”. The poet looks out and down from the edge of the falls where he sees half-forested, dry hills and a clear sky and observe the effect of the wind in the pines’ “rustling trembling limbs and twigs” (Snyder, 1974, p.41). The poet stands thrilled, listening. He relates joyfully, “This living flowing land is all there is, forever / We are it/ it sings through us---” (p.41). Snyder emphasizes the interaction between man and nature and that humans are not separate from nature but are, instead, a part of it.

The poem which lends the first section of *Turtle Island* its title, “Manzanita”, seems to be a song of plant life. The poem shows Snyder’s concept of “ethnobotany” and the use of vegetative life in human culture. The poem celebrates the immediate physical environment:

Manzanita the tips in fruit,
Clusters of hard green berries
The longer you look
The bigger they seem,
“little apples”. (Snyder 1974, p.1)

The poem suggests that natural variety is the critical factor in creating a healthy life. That is, unity and harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of the diversity of the natural world. “Charms,” the last poem of this section, on the other hand, is about animal life. If “Manzanita” expresses a vegetable kingdom, “Charms” adds the animal kingdom:

Thus I could be devastated and athirst with longing
for a lovely mare or lioness, or lady mouse,
in seeing the beauty from THERE
shining through her, some toss of the whiskers

or grace-full wave of the tail
that enchants.

enchants, and thus

CHARMS (Snyder 1974, p.28)

As Hunt points out, “Rocks, trees, sheep, rabbits, coyotes, eagles, bear, deer, and ravens all speak to [Snyder], for him and through him”(Hunt, 2004, p. 1). Taken together, those two poems do not only show Snyder’s new model of poetry, but they also show “How the reinhabitation of the land will be aided by songs of knowledge and community”(Molesworth, 1983,p. 101). Each poem, in fact, “speaks to a consciousness built of a total harmonization of man with nature and man with man” (p. 101).

“Tomorrows Song” from section three may be the most radical poem not only in this section but in the whole work:

The USA slowly lost its mandate
in the middle and later twentieth century
it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals,
a vote.

all the people turned away from it

myths die; even continents are impermanent(Snyder 1974, p.76)

The poem expresses Snyder’s most radical and challenging notion where animals and plants should be represented in government. If America wants to maintain its status and power, it should give the right to vote even to mountains and rivers. This, in fact, shows a remarkable development in Snyder’s vision for the nonhuman world.

“Walking the New York Bedrock” from *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), which is considered by many as Snyder’s most significant work, explores the wilderness within the city landscape. The poem speaks about plant and animal life within the city. Snyder does not show resentment towards the urban environment. As Christopher Benefy point out “Snyder imagines the world of wild nature beneath the structure of civilization” (1979, p. 42):

Squalls

From the steps leading down to the subway.

Blue-chested runner, a female, on car streets,

Red lights block traffic but she like the

Beam of a streetlight in the whine of Skilsaw,

She runs right through.

A cross street leads toward a river

North goes to the woods

South takes you fishing

Peregrines nest at the thirty-fifth floor. (Snyder, 1996, pp.100- 101)

While contemplating the city in a dreamlike vision, the speaker comes to recognize that he could escape this city by going to the nearby woods and rivers but he does not need to. One can have illumination in the city as well as in the country. City and country are accordingly not at odds. Whenever one is, one must inhabit the place, know it deeply and flow with it. Like the ginkgo trees in the subway, the wild peregrine hawk is at “home” on a ledge “at the thirty-seventh floor” (Hunt 2004, p 187). Snyder’s view on civilization is different from that of the Beat writers. While the Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg reject the urban way of life and oppose all kinds of civilization, Snyder does not. Through celebrating nature and wild life, Snyder believes that one may explore the wild within the city and gain enlightenment without going to the mountains. It does not make any difference for Snyder, therefore, to live in the country or in the city since he can be enlightened in both. Snyder can discover the wild even within the city and the wilderness has acquired added meaning from that which was known to Thoreau and Whitman. Snyder elevates the wild and was its poet in the second half of the 20th century, yet he adds a new urban dimension to it. Snyder once told *New York*

Quarterly, "It is simply placing myself at a different place in the network, which does not mean that I'm any less interested in the totality of the network, it's simply that's where I center myself" (Snyder 1980, P.37). The concept of the food chain which Snyder believed in may be detected in the difference between the "streets-bottom feeders" and those who occupy "sunnier niches" and the peregrine hawk feeding off the lower-down pigeon to survive. "Walking the New York Bedrock" shows the wild dispersed throughout the city:

The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as on more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed... The wild requires that we learn the terrains, and nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford to the streams and cross the ridges. And tell a story when we get back home. (Snyder, 1990, p. 24)

Snyder made great efforts to redefine the traditional concept of nature and fought against the negative notions and acts of people that greatly harmed environment. Snyder's writings, therefore, tried to change the attitude of people towards nature and by doing so, he wanted to change the way they act towards nature. His writings showed new ways of interacting with nature which preserve the natural world. For Snyder, a possible solution for the global crisis is to stimulate people to reconcile and bridge the gap between their civilization and wild culture. Snyder's commitment to this presentation of nature is instrumental in shaping modern environmental thought. Although Snyder's concern and involvement in environmental activism may be seen as an active display of passion, one can argue that his writings are more active and influential than his activism.

In all his poetry, ecological issues are given great importance, especially in *Turtle Island*. Snyder fought for the preservation of the environment from the deadly harm modern civilization caused. By showing the sublimity of the natural world and giving a sacred dimension to the moral commitment to the environment's safety from any probable human damage, Snyder could attract the people's attention to the beauty of the wilderness and urge them to protest against any harm which might be done to the natural world. Snyder considered himself a mediator between civilization and nature. He became, in America, a patron saint of ecology. His campaign for ecology has never ended. Snyder wrote in an essay entitled "Writers and the War against Nature" in one of his collection of essays *Back on the Fire* (2007, p.62), "What is happening now to nature worldwide, to plant life and wildlife, in ocean, grassland, forest, savannah, and desert in all spaces and habitat can be likened to a war against nature."

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