

Poetry & The Primitive

Human Ecology in the Work of Gary Snyder

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Abstract

This paper explores the vision of human ecology discernible in the work of the contemporary American poet, Gary Snyder. Snyder's insights into the ecological integration of primitive humans and into mythopoeic traditions extending from the Paleolithic to the present strongly suggest the importance to human ecology of symbols and rituals which embody and enact human environmental relationships. An assessment of Snyder's thought, drawn from his essays and interviews, provides a useful heuristic for contemporary human ecology in coming to grips with the importance of the inner life of the mind, psyche, and spirit in influencing our ecology.

Introduction

This paper explores the contribution to human ecology made by the contemporary American poet, Gary Snyder. I have chosen to focus on Snyder's essays and interviews more than the poetry because, while the poetry certainly carries forward and beautifully expresses many of Snyder's insights into human ecology, his prose is equally articulate and too little known.

Why is Gary Snyder's work of interest to human ecology? Because it serves to "link us in many ways with the most creative aspects of our archaic past" (1969, p. 93) — and does so with specific and frequent reference to human-environmental relationships. Because he is a careful and widely-read scholar, possessed of a truly interdisciplinary mind, who capably integrates material from anthropology, biology and ecology, psychology, folklore and mythology, and spiritual traditions. Because he is a poet of the first rank who finds his vocation inseparable both in origin and content from many of the problems which occupy human ecologists, and who brings in his poetic vision a unique and fresh perspective to bear on them. Because, like many renaissance men, he is ahead of his time. And finally, because an unabridged and adequate human ecology must be more than a science; because human

ecology belongs as much to the human spirit, art, and psyche as it does to the fields of science.

"Poetry and the Primitive" is the title of one of the essays collected in *Earth House Hold*, which Snyder published in 1969. Both the title and the essay itself (subtitled "Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique") sum up one of the main and most fruitful lines of thought in Snyder's human ecology. Briefly a student of anthropology himself (and a life-long scholar), Snyder's poetry as well as his view of poetry are steeped in an ecological interpretation of both human prehistory and the role of the poet in primitive culture. He perceives the origin of art as one with the development of an imagery and practice of ecological integration during prehistory. For him, the poet's role takes root in the shaman's healing song, the primitive poetry-music-drama-ritual reenactment of natural relationships, and the voice of nonhuman nature. Before inquiring about Snyder's interpretation of prehistory, let us look at his vision of the role of the poet.

Ecological Role of the Poet

To begin with, Snyder finds the source of poetry in breath itself; breath and voice. Taking a breath, the outer world comes into the body and is "experienced directly and totally, as living, mysterious, filling one with awe, leaving one grateful and humble. Breath, with pulse, is the source of rhythm" (1969, p. 123). Breath is spirit; it is 'inspiration.' Expiration gives voice — including the voice of poetry. Snyder experiences the voice of the species as fundamentally something that connects, a door through which something collective and transpersonal enters, "perhaps even the voice of wild animals, hills, rocks" (1969, p.123).

This transpersonal experience is acknowledged by many creative persons, who are aware that their art entails a connection with something bigger than themselves. Of that voice that enters one then, he declares it knows something about us "clearer and stronger than [we] know [ourselves]"...it sings "the inner song of the self and of the planet" (1969, p.

123). This is a connection that defines human ecology, the connection between self and planet.

Snyder feels that this experience was common among primitive people. It has to do with a concordance between nature and human nature. For Gary Snyder, “the Muse is the voice of nature herself” (1974, p. 107). He calls the poet a healer because, hearing that voice, he or she can assert wholeness. The poet asserts identity with the natural world, acting as “a voice for the nonhuman, for the natural world – actually a vehicle for another voice, to send it into the human world” (1980b, p. 171). The poet’s song tells us that we are eternally *in relationship*, with the earth, with nonhuman creatures. And it also “asserts a level of humanity with other people outside your own group” (1980b, p. 171). (Here Snyder exhibits not only a sharp sense of ethology and the intraspecific group conflicts it portends, but an equally acute sense of the human capacity to go beyond this instinct.)

The poet’s role is shamanic because he or she contacts and communicates with nonhuman life: “Poetry within the civilized arena of history is the fragmented attempt to recreate a ‘healing song’ aspect of the shaman’s practice” (1980b, p. 175). Healing songs work by “bringing back in the dream-lore, myth-lore...bringing it back into the consciousness of everybody, to show everyone who they are, and to give people a place” (1980b, p. 176). (The shaman’s practice and a sense of place are, as we shall see, two of Snyder’s cherished and recurring themes.)

For these reasons, a “concern with the planet, with the integrity of the biosphere, is a long and deeply-rooted concern of the poet” (1977b, p. 36). Snyder teaches that there is a wilderness within ourselves and holds that the role of the poet-shaman in prehistoric times was to enter that wilderness to contact and provide a voice for the other, nonhuman life with which we share the world without. It was “to sing the voice of corn...of the Pleiades...of bison...of antelope. To contact in a very special way an ‘other’ that was not within the human sphere; something that could not be learned by continually consulting other human teachers, but could only be learned by venturing outside the borders and going into your own mind-wilderness, unconscious wilderness” (1977b, pp. 36-37.).

A sense of communication with all of life’s network often happens in the wilderness. Snyder believes that human nature leads naturally “into nature – the wilderness – and the reciprocities and balances by which man lives on earth” (1969, p. 127). He holds to the integration of inner and outer – “[that which] we are within, the Self which is our potential, is the actual and deeply realized condition without” (1969, p. 127).

A culture that alienates itself from the wilderness outside alienates itself from that other wilderness within and is ultimately self-destructive. The reverse is also true: “To make ‘human nature’ suspect is also to make nature – the wilderness – the adversary. Hence the ecological crisis” (1969, p. 115). One cannot save the outer wilderness without venturing into the one within: “The next great step of mankind is...into the nature of his own mind. the real question is ‘just what is consciousness?’” (1969, p. 116). And, one cannot know one’s own nature without getting to know the nature that lies outside, in the environment. The two are inseparably interlinked in both Snyder’s conception and his poetry.

Thus the poet who speaks “as a voice for another place, the deep unconscious” also “works toward integration of interior unknown realms of mind with present...consciousness. The outer world of nature and the inner world of the unconscious are brought to a single focus...by the work of the dramatist--ritualist-artist-poet” (1980b, p. 172).

The poet has an equally important role in the social world of human affairs. He or she looks at a culture’s key archetypes, images, and symbols; like a mechanic checking under the hood of your car, he wants to see if they are working. Poets, according to Snyder, experiment with changes in these deep structures of knowing about a century before they actually enter historical time and change society at large. Snyder treats symbols as something like nutrients that are taken up and used by a healthy culture; he calls this process an “ecology of symbols” (1980b, p. 71). One of the poet’s roles in that ecology is to “[note] the main structural connections and [see] which parts of the symbol system are no longer useful or applicable, though everyone is giving them credence. And out of his own vision and hearing of voices he seeks for new paths for the mind-energy to flow” (190b, p. 71). In several

places, Snyder speaks of a 'recycling' aspect of poetry; sometimes he thinks of it as 'composting': "Poets are...like mushrooms, or fungus – they can digest the symbol-detritus" (1980b, p. 71).

In all of these functions, the poet is transforming information for the culture and performing an ecological role in adjusting or maintaining the adjustment of his or her culture to its environment. "Poetry is intimately linked to any culture's fundamental worldview, [its] body of lore, which is its myth base, its symbol base, and the source of much of its values – that myth-lore foundation that underlies any society. That foundation is most commonly expressed and transmitted in the culture by poems, which is to say by songs...that are linked to a dramatic or ritual performance much of the time" (1980b, p. 70).

Snyder does not *restrict* the poet to an ecological role, but more than any other poet or critic he sees poetry in a larger perspective, in the context of anthropology, in continuity with prehistory, under the influence of the mutable hand of evolutionary time, in interaction with environment. He also knows that the value and function of poetry has two sides: "...one side of it is *in time*, the other is *out of time*. The in-time side of it is to tune us in to mother nature and human nature so that we live *in time*, in our societies in a way and on a path in which all things can come to fruition equally, and together in harmony....And the out-of-time function...is to return us to our own true original nature at this instant forever" (1980b, pp. 72-73).

Prehistoric Tradition / Primitive Condition

In time, the poet's role is grounded in "a primitive worldview which tried to open and keep open lines of communication with nature" (1974, p. 107). Snyder describes the primitive condition as "a living oral tradition," living "vastly...in the mythological present, in close relation to nature" (1969, p. 117). The oral literature of that tradition, "the ballad, the folktale, myth, the song," have been, he reminds us, "the major literary experience of mankind" (1977b, p. 18).

Thus, the poetic heritage in which Snyder works descended as an oral tradition from a certain form of primitive consciousness through which the earliest human groups maintained balance and integration with their environ-

ment. He discerns in it an evolution and continuity of imagery, teaching, and practice "that runs without a break from Paleo-Siberian shamanism and Magdalenian cave-painting...right down to [the present]" (1969, p. 115). He intimates that it contains archetypes (though he rarely uses the word) of nature and ecology which facilitate environmental balance and cultural integration. It is a tradition of knowledge of nature and natural things embodied equally in the psyche and culture (collective mythic images), in spiritual experience, and in rational analysis and information (lore, theories, models).

Snyder does not confine his interpretation of this tradition to the evolutionary history of art or imagery. His work is alive with the possibility of a cultural transmission dating back to the Paleolithic which concerns all facets of our relationship to nature – our ecology. In addition to practices of art and human ecology, Snyder sees a "transmission of gnosis [i.e., spiritual knowledge], a potential social order, and techniques of enlightenment," (1969, p. 116) surviving from prehistoric times. More than an archetype, this is a developing cultural complex. Reintegrating this ancient way of being with the alienated intellectual and industrial underpinnings of contemporary Western civilization, Snyder strives to create a holistic worldview that is as shamanistic as it is scientific, as mythopoeic as it is laboratorial, as at home in the co-participating experience of natural integration as it is in Aristotelian analysis.

It is important to acknowledge that Snyder's understanding of this tradition draws deeply on the scholarly literature on prehistoric culture in mythology and anthropology. Yet his immersion in prehistoric culture is sometimes so profound that one cannot avoid the sense that he has somehow *lived* it – in the way a poet must live everything he writes about. As a result, he includes but goes beyond the scientific literature to a more integrated vision of that legacy. Note how he links human spiritual, psychological, and mythic development with sociopolitical, economic, and technological evolution in this short characterization of the tradition arising in the Neolithic:

...the Neolithic was long a stable part of human experience. It represented 8,000 to 10,000 years of relative affluence, stability, a high degree of democracy, equality of men and

women – a period during which all of our vegetables and animals were domesticated, and weaving and ceramics came into being. Most of the arts that civilization is founded on, the crafts and skills, are the legacy of the Neolithic. You might say that the groundwork for all the contemporary spiritual disciplines was well done by then. The world body of myth and folklore – the motifs or folklore and the main myths and myth themes distributed universally around the globe – [were also laid down then] and give evidence of the depth of the tradition. (1980b, p. 114)

Snyder is one of those rare individuals who, like Loren Eiseley, truly appreciate the significance of evolutionary time. It is important to remember, when reading Snyder, how fundamentally the longevity of human prehistory has conditioned his perspective. Fathoming the Neolithic experience described above, or the tradition of cave painting (which, running from 35,000 to 10,000 years ago, Snyder describes as “the world’s single longest art tradition” [1980b, p. 113]), gives Snyder great breadth of view, as if from a mountain peak. From that height, he regards literacy as a small part of the totality of human experience and civilization as “a tiny thing that occurs very late” (1980b, p. 113). “Civilization”, he says, “is new, writing is even newer, and writing as something that has an influence on many people’s lives came only during the last three or four centuries. Libraries and academies are very recent developments, and world religions...are quite new. Behind them are millennia of human beings sharpening, developing, and getting to know themselves” (1980b, p. 114).

Integration / Connection / Interaction

What does Snyder mean by “human beings sharpening, developing, and getting to know themselves”? In part, as we have already seen, he means getting to know wild nature within by making contact with that without, as well as the reverse. This is an integrative inner process, and Snyder’s view of human/nature is equally and fundamentally integrative. He places his subjects in environment, defined by relationships, as poetry is relationship. Ecology and Mind mirror one another: “the same principles which are at work in our own minds [are] the exact principles that are operating around us” (1980b, p. 29).

Connection and interaction permeate his

imagery as they do ecology itself. Few human ecologists show such deep awareness of this simple, essential principle in their work. Snyder makes one point over and over: that both the inner development and ecological integration of humanity are intimately and inextricably linked to a direct and personally-lived experience of nature and human life. That experience of nature meaningfully related to human life is, it seems to me, at the very core of human ecology (as a practice).

“We all know what primitive cultures don’t have,” Snyder writes, “What they do have is this knowledge of connection and responsibility which amounts to a spiritual ascesis for the whole community” (1969, p. 121). This “knowledge of connection and responsibility” lies at the heart of human ecology. Quoting the anthropologist Stanley Diamond, Snyder affirms “the sickness of civilization consists in its failure to incorporate (and only then) to move beyond the limits of the primitive” (1969, p. 126).

Civilization is no longer a part of the ecological community in the way primitive culture was. Snyder believes that it is possible to regain that connection. In one passage, he describes it in terms of communion. It requires, he says, “connecting with the sacramental energy-exchange, evolutionary mutual sharing aspect of life. And if we talk about evolution of consciousness we also have to talk about evolution of bodies, which takes place by that sharing of energies, passing it back and forth, which is done by literally eating each other” (1980b, p. 89).

A Buddhist, Snyder sees the world as “a vast interrelated network in which all objects and creatures are necessary and illuminated” (1969, pp. 91-92). It is this Buddhist grounding which allows him to go into Krishna’s devouring maw and, on the other side, discover that “beyond the enlightenment that can say ‘these beings are dead already; go ahead and kill them Arjuna’, is a loving, simple awareness of the absolute beauty and preciousness of mice and weeds” (1969, p. 128). Is there a more delightful or understated correction of religious sensibilities to be found? And in the same breath, calling us back to “mice and weeds”, Snyder quietly returns both religious impulses and spiritual enlightenment to a biological and ecological ground.

Snyder connects the “comradeship” that characterizes the primitive relationship with the landscape with the “continual exchanges of being, form, and position” that is ecology. Of the relation of “every person, animals, forces” in a web of life and death, he says “they are ‘interborn’. *It may well be that interbirth – for we are actually mutually creating each other and all things while living – is the objective fact of existence which we have not yet brought into conscious knowledge and practice*” (1969, p. 129). This, I would say, is a fundamental insight of human ecology, and its *raison d’être* must be, in part, to bring such awareness to knowledge and practice.

Snyder makes clear that his vision includes, but extends beyond the biological network of relationships: “It is clear that the empirically observable interconnectedness of nature is but a corner of the vast ‘jeweled net’ which moves from without to within” (1969, p. 129). This too is indispensable for human ecology, to go beyond the ‘without-centered’ focus of the field as currently practiced to a totality of without plus within.

For Snyder prehistoric art implies “a sense of the mutuality of life and death in the food chain” and “a sense of a sacramental quality in that relationship” (1977b, p. 60). Indeed, he recognizes that “the biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension” (1969, p. 63) – a recognition which most scientists are loathe to entertain! The imperatives he finds in that dimension are fundamental to human ecology: they are a sense of gratitude, an attitude of responsibility, and an imperative to “keep in contact” (1969, p. 63). The latter I take to be synonymous with the connectivity or interaction which Young (1989) finds to be at the heart of human ecology.

Who are we, in Snyder’s human ecology? “We are all composite beings, not only physically [i.e., in the cocreation of evolution] but intellectually, whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time” (1969, p. 63). Snyder stands with Eiseley as the one of the few writers with courage and vision enough to recognize and embrace humanity as nothing final, but something ultimately transitory. “There is no ‘self’ to be found in that” Snyder says, “and yet oddly enough, there is. Part of you is out there waiting to come into you, and

another part of you is behind you” (1969, p. 64). What better way to state our evolutionary nature? And, as he often does, Snyder adds something not integrated in the conventional wisdom of science: “and the ‘just this’ of the ever-present moment holds all the transitory little selves in its mirror. The Avatamasaka (Flower-Wreath) jeweled net-interpenetration-ecological systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us, no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the Whole Self is the whole thing. Thus, knowing who and where are intimately linked” (1969, p. 64).

Ritual Reenactment

How do we know and connect “who” and “where”? Beginning with primitive cultures, humankind has not only symbolized ecological relationships, but has *symbolically acted them out* (e.g., the shaman ‘becomes’ the animal of the hunt, etc.). It may be that this “ritual reenactment” helps maintain these relationships in balance. It is, from Snyder’s perspective, just this that, in our evolution, makes us something unique: “from the spiritual standpoint, the evolution of consciousness goes at a different pace....a steady enactment and reenactment over and over again of basic psychological and inner spiritual dramas, until we learn to find our way through to the next step” (1980b, p. 87). It is “that scale of time and that scale of commitment, both to the land and to the process of evolution of consciousness” (1980b, p. 87) that Snyder respects in primitive culture, and offers to 20th-century civilization in his own work.

A critical feature of the primitive ritual was that it was a *whole*: “That wholeness, in part, was a function of the fact that they all worked together: poetry didn’t exist apart from song, song didn’t exist apart from ritual, ritual didn’t exist apart from vision and meditation” (1980b, p. 122). Without the integration of all of its parts, the ritual loses its power: “we have yet to develop the possibilities of that circle with music, dance, and drama in their original archaic poetic relationship” (1980b, p. 164). It also was originally *participative* and in that too lay great power. One did not merely watch a performance, one was *part* of the drama; it *happened* to the primitives who *took part*. Snyder emphasizes “the primacy of performance: in the dark room, around the fire, children and old people, hearing and joying together in the words, the acting and

the images. It's there that the shiver of awe and delight occurs, not in any dry analysis of archetypes or motifs" (1979, p. xi). Snyder understands the necessity – in exploring the ecological role of primitive myth – of entering into the performance itself, into the language and into the poetry, since its 'meaning' and effect were as much imparted by these as by any logical analysis that might be abstracted and thought to lie behind them.

This same whole lies in myth, and Snyder is aware of that: "Contemporary theory of the function of mythology almost inevitably involves theory of the function of language, ritual, religion, and art" (1979, p. 97). Thus poetry and mythology are intimately tied with our many-faceted participation in the environment of which we are a part. In his Senior Thesis, written at Reed College in 1951 and later published as *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*, Snyder quotes Malinowski to the effect that, in primitive cultures, "myth...is not merely a story told but a reality lived" (1979, p. 99) and Kerenyi on the possibility that archetypal 'mythologems' may be literally present in the physical beginnings of man (1979, p. 101). Snyder is clearly aware, in this early work, that, among its many functions, myth (in its larger sense, including the oral poetic tradition) can adjust a group to its environmental context, place it consciously in its living setting, and govern the relationships that are its ecology. His work can be seen, from one perspective, as not only a continuing elaboration of that insight and, more, as a critique of the lack of that function in contemporary Western civilization, but as an enactment of that function.

Snyder integrates the ecological role and function of the poet-shaman and the mythic tradition with the new knowledge brought by the sciences of ecology and biology to offer a "biopoetry" and a vision of hope: "When we bring together our awareness of the worldwide network of folktale and myth imagery that has been the 'classical tradition' – the lore-bearer – of everyone for 10,000 and more years, and the new (but always there) knowledge of the worldwide interdependence of natural systems, we have the biopoetic beginning of a new level of world poetry and myth. That's the beginning for this age..." (1980b, p. 173). His own work, in which, for example, little lessons on lodgepole pine fire ecology stand beside

pictures of the social ecology of the logging life, evocations of classical myths, and excursions into deeply participative contact with nonhuman life, is such a biopoetry.

Shaman / Nonhuman Representation

We have already spoken of Snyder's vision of the poet's role in making contact with nonhuman life. This is, in primitive cultures, the role of the shaman. "The practice of shamanism has at its very center a teaching from the nonhuman...the shaman with his or her pelt and antlers, or various other guises, songs going back to the Pleistocene and before...speaks for wild animals, the spirit of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through him....In the shaman's world, wilderness and the unconscious become analogous: he who knows and is at ease in one, will be at home in the other" (1977b, p. 12).

"A certain kind of power, wisdom, and experience" come when the poet-shaman steps outside of the social nexus "and make contact with a totally nonhuman other" (1980b, p. 155). One of the most archaic religious practices on earth, shamanism "informs the fundamental lore of the planet, that is to say, all of the worldwide body of folktale that we all share" (1980b, p. 155). The shaman makes "visible and public" the symbol systems "that are present in the psyche of every adult member of their society"; he or she "is a manifestation of the archetypal images" (1979, p. 94). The shaman acts out relationships within or embodied by these symbolic systems; following Herman Broch, Snyder states "The knowledge of the archetype is knowledge of a set of relationships between variable images...The relationships are created and recurrent in the first place because of man's need to 'build perceptive models of the world' and myth becomes an 'abbreviation of the world content by presenting its structure'" (1979, pp. 95-96). The shaman contacts and gives voice to the "nonhuman other" to which those relationships bind us.

Thus, Snyder sees the 20th century legal question, "Do trees have standing?" as having been already answered – and the answer forgotten. In primitive cultures "a kind of ultimate democracy is practiced. Plants and animals are also people, and, through certain rituals and dances, are given a place and a voice in the political discussions of the humans.

They are represented” (1974, p. 104).

“We can judge,” Snyder says, from such archeological evidence as the cave paintings and Magdalenian stone carvings, “the existence of a tremendous interest, exchange, and sympathy between people and animals” (1980b, p. 114). The loss of that interest, exchange, and sympathy may have more to do with our present environmental crises than questions of which technology we use. To balance our environmental relationships, then, is not merely a matter of adopting “appropriate technology.” In the following passage, Snyder leads to an urgent conclusion: that we in the 20th century must, as our ancestors did thousands of years ago (and for thousands of years), allow nonhuman life and the environment itself to reenter our human processes and systems of governance and self-regulation.

The elaborate, yearly, cyclical production of grand ritual dramas...can be seen as a process by which the whole society consults the non-human...and allows some individuals to step totally out of their human roles to put on the mask, costume, and mind of Bison, Bear, Squash, Corn, or Pleiades; to reenter the human circle in that form and by song, mime, and dance convey a greeting from the other realm. Thus, a speech on the floor of Congress from a whale. (1977b, p. 13).

Chastising those who cannot see a *reasonable* mode of either listening to, or speaking for, nature except by analytical and scientific means, Snyder affirms that we “must learn to take this complex, profound, moving, and in many ways highly appropriate worldview of...our ancestors into account” (1977b, p. 14). One of the few modes that gives us access to that view, he says, is poetry.

“There are specific things to be learned from each bird, plant, and animal” Snyder affirms, “and this learning is moral as well as being useful for survival” (1977b, p. 87). If they are *not* given a voice, he asserts “they will submit non-negotiable demands about our stay on earth. We are beginning to get non-negotiable demands right now from the air, the water, the soil” (1974, p. 108).

Hunting

One way in which primitive peoples listened to and learned from the nonhuman, Snyder

believes, was in their hunting practices. He speculates that the biophysical, evolutionary roots of meditation and spiritual practice lie in a kind of hunting which “enter[s] into the movement-consciousness-mind-presence of animals” (1980b, p. 108).

Snyder finds in primitive hunting a metaphor for ecological integration: “Almost all animals are beautiful and Paleolithic hunters were deeply moved by it. To hunt means to use your body and senses to the fullest: to strain your consciousness to feel what the deer are thinking today, this moment; to sit still and let your self go into the birds and wind while waiting by a game trail” (1969, p. 120).

Why is American Indian hunting technology relatively undeveloped? he asks. Because “they didn’t hunt with tools, they hunted with their minds. They did things – learning an animal’s behavior – that rendered elaborate tools unnecessary. You learn animal behavior by becoming an acute observer – by entering the mind – of animals” (1980b, p. 107). And in the same manner humans have the special capacity to learn and enter into all ecological relationships through ritual and reenactment; through these doors we enter them a second time, with consciousness (being once contained in them already merely by living on earth). It may be the dulling or loss of this uniquely human entry into environmental relationships that engenders the “environmental crisis” and endangers our survival. We may need more rituals of ecological relationship to balance the cold rationality of the 20th century intellect.

Feminine

Snyder also richly gathers in the feminine in his interpretation of our relationship to nature. In this, his work led the ‘deep ecology’ philosophy by more than a decade, but with a sophistication one wishes that movement would attain. Proceeding beyond the somewhat naive rudimentary worship of the feminine which has been taken up in some quarters, Snyder connects the feminine to the history of Western civilization and comes upon the source of Cathar/Romantic love in a more apt and concise formulation than either C.S. Lewis (1958) or Denis de Rougemont (1940) achieved in their classic works on courtly love. Return to the image of taking in breath with which we began our consideration of Snyder. Recall the connection between self and planet Snyder describes, that connection which touches

something deep within. He takes this line of thought directly into his inquiry into the ecological role of the feminine, as follows:

this touching-deep is as a mirror, and man in his sexual nature has found the clearest mirror to be his human lover....As the West moved into increasing(ly)...complex...civilization, woman as nature, beauty, and The Other came to be an all-dominating symbol, secretly striving through the last three millennia with...Jehovah, [who is] a projection of the gathered anti-nature social forces (1969, p. 124)

Thus in the West, “Muse and Romantic Love became part of the same energy, and woman as nature the field for experiencing the universe as sacramental. The lovers’ bed was the sole place to enact the dances and ritual dramas that link primitive people to their geology and the Milky Way” (1969, p. 124). It is not possible to develop the point further here but, watered by Snyder’s insight, de Rougemont’s somewhat dry and unsatisfactory conclusion to his otherwise excellent history of love in the Western world resolves into something a little more alive with exciting possibilities.

Snyder, however, barely pauses. Next he makes a startling conjunction between *voice* and the *feminine*. “Voice is female” Snyder says, instructing us that as Sarasvati (India) or Sophia, the from-the-beginning companion of God, she is the actual agent of creation and the creative word – the *Logos spermatikos*. And, of course, she is wisdom. Following Indo-European etymology, Snyder finds that the feminine is ‘wave’ (from which, ‘wife’) and so combines – as does an electron – both particle (individual) and wave (collective) nature in one being (1969, pp. 124-125). Thus Snyder accomplishes in poetry the same synthesis of ancient and modern knowledge which Capra popularized in *The Tao of Physics*.

Noting that the conch is an ancient symbol of the sense of hearing *and* of the female, “the vulva and the fruitful womb”, Snyder describes “a bas-relief of a four-point buck...licking his tongue out toward two conches” at Koptos and reminds us of the “many Magdalenian bone and horn engravings of bear, bison, and deer licking abstract penises and vulvas. At this point”, he says, “(and from our most archaic past transmitted) the mystery of voice becomes one

with the mystery of body” (1969, p. 125).

This must be seen as a statement of his own poetics as well, embracing not merely voice and body, but the ecological integration and evolutionary history of both. What scene has Snyder pictured if not one of wild nature ‘licking’ our inner creative organs and inner ear – the ear with which we listen to whatever it is that goes by the name of God? This may be the ultimate symbol of the integration of wild nature and man’s unprecedented mind – the consciousness that arose out of it. It is a symbol of balance and integration in natural relationships: it is nature whispering into our inner ear, the very voice of integration pictured, ‘speaking’ to humankind about where we come from, who our brothers and sisters are, talking of ancient kinship. Eiseley is the only comparable writer capable of painting such an image of nature informing that organic unfolding which we are.

The consciousness which develops such symbols is the source of ecological conscience, of religious awe and connection. Snyder says, “I 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 I think we mean by an ecological conscience” (1974, p. 106).

Bioregionalism / Reinhabitation

The practice of an ecological conscience has to do, for Snyder, with the way in which we inhabit the land – and I hope by now that it is clear that he means by “inhabitation” something more than how we use tools, draw property lines, and mine resources; something that includes how we know and make contact with nature. His ethic is to settle in, take responsibility, and pay attention.

“There are”, however, “many people on the planet now who are not ‘inhabitants’....They live on it literally like invaders” (1980b, p. 169). The ethic and practice of bioregionalism means to correct the environmental imbalances which are almost unavoidable under the invader mentality. Snyder – together with his friend, the poet Wendell Barry – articulated this philosophy well before it achieved the vogue it enjoys today.

For Snyder, to *inhabit* a place is “to live carefully, wisely, and delicately [there], in such a way that you can live there adequately

and comfortably [and so that] your children and grandchildren and generations a thousand years in the future will still be able to live there” (1980b, p. 86). “Inhabitation” is local and specific to the particular environment: “countless local ecosystem habitation styles emerged” in prehistory, he asserts, “People developed specific ways to be in each of those niches: plant knowledge, boats, dogs, traps, nets, fishing...From steep jungle slopes of southwest China to coral atolls to barren arctic deserts – a spirit of what is was to be there evolved, that spoke of a direct sense of relation to the ‘land’ – which really means the totality of the local bioregional system, from cirrus clouds to leaf mold” (1977b, p. 59). True to his philosophy, Snyder does not present this knowledge as merely technical in content nor merely informational in form. “Original Mind speaks through little myths and tales that tell us how to be in some specific ecosystem of the far-flung world”, he says (1979, p. x).

Snyder’s instructions for “reinhabitation” are simple and straightforward; unlike so many prescriptions offered by human ecologists, they therefore hold out some hope of actually being capable of being adopted and practiced by humanity. (We know the ability is within us because Snyder asks for nothing more than what humankind once did naturally, before civilization.) “You should really know what the complete natural world of your region is and know what all its interactions are and how you are interacting with it yourself”, he says, “This is just part of the work of becoming who you are, where you are” (1980b, p. 16). This is the work Snyder does in and through his poetry.

Summary and Conclusion

Snyder’s work presents the thought of a man who has truly stepped outside of the cultural agreement which most men and women sign with their very consciousness, an agreement to limit what they see in the world to those things and manners of seeing that the culture approves and teaches. Snyder’s essays of the late 1960’s are already historically interesting; they lead the popular interest in mythology, shamanism, and deep ecology by at least 10 to 15 years. One must believe that they helped to develop that interest. His Reed College thesis, for example, written in 1951, already explicitly recognizes Jung’s extension of the realm of the unconscious “to contain a vast storehouse of images based not only on the individual’s formative experience, but on the basic

experience of all humanity – the collective unconscious” (1979, p. 68). In that same paper Snyder quotes Joseph Campbell’s interpretations of myth patterns in relation to primitive rites of initiation and the psychological journey into the unconscious to attain wholeness. These influences not only must be seen as formative to the environmental philosophy developed in his poetry and essays, but shows an appreciation of the importance of these thinkers that precedes the general cultural evaluation.

Based on his record, Gary Snyder would be well suited, as he approaches sixty, to sit on the kiva of elders whose function he describes in *Turtle Island* as “to maintain and transmit the lore of the tribe on the highest levels.” “It would be understood,” he says, “that a council of elders, the caretakers of the lore of the culture, would open themselves to representation from other life-forms” (1974, p. pp. 108-109). And in so doing, they would help to guide their people in their natural relationships and to maintain a healthy environmental conscience. They would transmit an environmental ethic, about which Snyder says “these values seem almost biologically essential to the survival of humanity” (1969, p. 105). His work has contributed substantially to such an ethic and thereby, we hope, to our survival.

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