

“With you / in me”: Gary Snyder and the Wild Within

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While eating dinner in Nevada City with Dana Goodyear of *The New Yorker*, Gary Snyder takes a break from his goat-cheese cake appetizer and leaves the table for a moment. Goodyear has been listening to Snyder talk about knives, hunting, and the impending Sierra Nevada winter. While he's gone from the table, a waiter approaches Goodyear. “He's one of my absolute heroes,” she says. When he returns, his gold tooth glistening as he smiles, Goodyear tells Snyder what the waiter said to her. Snyder, whose 78 years of life have been filled with poetry, mountain climbing, essay writing, teaching, political activism, his family, his neighbors, and his friends, responds, “You shouldn't have told me that” (Goodyear).

If Snyder is not a hero, he is certainly daring, adventurous, and wild. Some fifty years before Goodyear's interview with Snyder, the poet was dangling from a cliff in the mountains of Japan. The only thing protecting him from falling to his death was a thin rope attached to his foot. A group of Japanese monks stood at the edge of the cliff, holding the other end of the rope. The monks were initiating Snyder — testing his will and dedication to Zen principles. Snyder came to Japan not to escape and live in solitude, but to discover the natural wildness inherent in humanity. Snyder believed the monks knew this secret — that they were among the few who understood the intimate connection between humanity and nature. “We'll drop you if you don't tell the truth,” the monks threatened. When Goodyear asks Snyder about this experience, he responds, “I have some very wonderful overalls from them” (Goodyear). In spite of this harrowing encounter, Snyder focuses not on the extreme danger he faced, or even on the personal lessons he learned from the experience, but on his distinctly human experience with these monks. The monks were kind enough to give him overalls — they were people helping people, following some “golden rule” of balance, harmony, and community — and that's all that really matters to Snyder.

Indeed, Snyder is not of the tradition of other nature writers who create a sharp distinction between humanity and nature. It is common for nature writers to see humans as a sort of cancer that threatens the purity of the natural environment. For this reason, “discovering nature” is often conceived as escaping into the woods to live alone — to remove any hint of human presence and call such a barren world “pure.” In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau states, “I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating” (111). Snyder represents an entirely different perception of the relationship between humans and nature. Rather than separating the two, Snyder sees humans as an inherent part of a larger ecological whole. Snyder describes himself as “a poet who has preferred not to distinguish in poetry between nature and humanity” (Goodyear). In Snyder's view, we must embrace our wild humanness and see ourselves as no different from the plants, trees, and grass that surround us.

We see this emphasis on human connection in a photo printed in *Look* magazine in 1969. As described by Goodyear, the photo depicts Gary Snyder and his wife bathing in the Yuba River near their home in the Sierra Nevada. Snyder stands naked in the water, holding up his newborn son, Kai. His wife sits on the side of the river looking onward, her pregnant belly protruding over her jeans (Goodyear). There is a raw earthiness to the photo that roots Snyder in the wild, back-to-

nature aesthetic one expects of a new-age nature writer. Yet the photo ultimately paints Snyder as a family man. Unlike Thoreau, to whom he is often compared, Snyder's philosophy does not include the denial of human connection and sanctification of solitude so typical of the genre. As the photo emphasizes, Snyder asserts the importance of family and community within the framework of ecology. He embraces his inner wildness in all that he does.

Though Snyder has more recently expressed his ecological worldview through essays and speaking engagements, he is first and foremost a poet, and his poetry is infused with the ideas of deep ecology and harmony with nature. Tracing the literary history of Snyder is central to understanding his philosophical message and the way his perception of nature has been interpreted.

Less than a year before Snyder's harrowing experience with the Japanese monks, he was performing with Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and other Beat poets at the Six Gallery reading, an event which would bring the literary and countercultural movement of the Beat generation to fruition. At the reading, Snyder recited "A Berry Feast," a poem about the destruction of wild lands for the development of suburbs. "Dead city in dry summer," the poem laments, "where berries grow." From the beginning of the Beat movement, it is clear that Snyder represents a unique voice for nature and the environment. While other Beat poets were distinctly urban, Snyder acted as a voice for nature, weaving the Beat counterculture into his own ecological worldview (Goodyear). The Beat movement clearly influenced Snyder, giving him a raw and radical edge and cementing him as a prominent countercultural figure. Yet as Snyder became more immersed in Buddhist and Zen ideologies, he would soon depart from the Beats and forge a path still rooted in anti-establishment rhetoric, but with a new focus on humanity's deep connection with nature.

Snyder's academic interest in Eastern philosophy began long before his stint in Japan. Snyder devoted much of his early career to translating the poetry of Han Shan, a T'ang dynasty dharma bum (Campbell), and studying East Asian *sumi* painting under artist Chiura Obata (Goodyear). After immersing himself more deeply in Eastern religions while in Japan, these philosophies became not just an academic interest, but inherently rooted in Snyder's character. As Ayako Takahashi describes in "The Shaping of Gary Snyder's Ecological Consciousness," Snyder's conceptualization of deep ecology was most influenced by Hua-yen Buddhism, which emphasizes the "infinitely crossing relationships and the interconnectedness of all things" (314). The influence of Buddhist and Zen philosophies came to define Snyder's poetry and, later, his political philosophy.

Interestingly, there exists among scholarly circles a debate as to the legitimacy of Snyder's interpretation of Eastern religions. Many criticize Snyder of *whiteshaminism*, a concept that, according to David Landis Barnhill, "refers to white writers (often very concerned with nature) who claim that their writings have the shamanistic function of healing" (117). Referencing the cultural borrowing from Indian and Native American poets, Barnhill continues, "The result is that Indian writers are supplanted as white scholars and poets set the standard for Indianness in scholarship and literature. [...] Native American poets, then, lose their ability to express their own Indianness as the literary audience turns to whites" (118-119). In this interpretation, Snyder appropriates elements of shamanistic cultures to fit a romanticized and falsified conception of nature that is tailored to the West. It is cultural theft, robbing Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Native

American writers of their voice while misrepresenting their cultures in a way that perpetuates white supremacy.

Though Snyder's appropriation of shamanism is questionable, his beautiful articulation of deep ecology cannot be ignored, as it is central to Snyder's identity as a poet. Taking a brief look at Snyder's poetry from a literary perspective makes clear the extent to which the concept of deep ecology penetrates his work. In "Gary Snyder's Ecopiety" from the *Environmental History Review*, Hwa Yol Jung and Petee Jung analyze the philosophical and literary significance of Snyder's poetry. Particularly fascinating is the authors' analysis of Snyder's poem "Running Water Music II," from *Regarding Wave*. An excerpt of the poem reads:

Clear running stream Clear running stream Your water is light to my mouth

And a light to my dry body and your flowing

Music,

in my ears. free, Flowing free!

With you in me.

The intimate connection between the poem's narrator and the stream is apparent. As Jung and Jung describe, "Here the music of the stream's flow and the mood (*Stimmung*) of the poet interpenetrate: 'Without' and 'Within' are the two reversible or chiasmic sides of the same happening, they are two moments of one process or unity" (78). The narrator is speaking directly to the stream, treating it as an equal. In addition, Snyder states that the stream is literally flowing within the narrator. The stream and the narrator are essentially one and the same. This expression of the intimate and symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural environment is common throughout Snyder's poetry.

It is clear that Snyder's poems have philosophical significance, yet we can also see an inherently political message — these poems aren't simply analyses of nature, but act as a call to action. Snyder does not necessarily make the political nature of his poetry obvious, at least in his early writing, but the political significance cannot be denied in light of the growing environmental crises of the time. Since the Six Gallery reading in 1955, America's habits of overconsumption and environmental degradation only grew. From the destructive testing of nuclear weapons in the 1950s and 60s, to the devastating effects of napalm and other environmentally harmful substances in the Vietnam War, to the impacts of air and water pollution, the crises of the environment were becoming hard to ignore. In light of this, it seems almost inevitable that Snyder's poetry would be read as critiques of the modern consumption machine. Patrick D. Murphy, a literary critic and expert on Snyder's written works, states, "Snyder's poetry and his prose cannot afford to be read only to appreciate their aesthetic qualities. The message is too important to be ignored" (169). Later in his career, Snyder makes clear mention of political activism in his poetry. In "I Went into the Maverick Bar" from his 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Turtle Island*, he writes, "I came back to myself, / To the real work, to / 'What is to be done.'" Given Snyder's poetic history and his

established ecological rhetoric, we can assume this “real work” involves fighting for the protection of the environment.

Indeed, it wasn't long before Snyder was recognized not simply for his importance in the literary community, but also as a political visionary and leader of the environmental movement. The publishing of his essay “Four Changes” in *Turtle Island* propelled Snyder as a unique and important voice for environmentalism. In the essay, Snyder warns of overpopulation, pollution, and overconsumption, and asserts that “a ‘growing economy’ is no longer healthy.” Snyder’s solution to these societal ills centers on community and harmony with nature. He states, “...if we are to survive, we must transform the five-millennia- long urbanizing civilization tradition into a new ecologically-sensitive, harmony- oriented, wild-minded scientific/spiritual culture.” Though such sentiments had certainly been expressed in the past (including in the Eastern religions studied by Snyder), Snyder was among the first major American voices to articulate this ecological perspective on the environment. Jack Shoemaker, a friend of Snyder’s, states, “‘Four Changes’ really elevated him to be an environmental leader of the counterculture. It wasn’t a hippie-dippy, feather-wearing poem. It was a manifesto, and the national environmental movement had to take it seriously” (Goodyear).

After publishing “Four Changes,” Snyder began lecturing at universities and conferences, acting as a major voice in environmental discourse in the 1970s and beyond. His unique philosophy, known as “bioregionalism,” emphasizes the importance of local culture and community-based organizing. Peter Berg, an environmental activist from the Planet Drum Foundation, describes a bioregion as “a geographic area defined by natural characteristics, including watersheds, landforms, soils, geological qualities, native plants and animals, climate, and weather ... [which] includes human beings as a species in the interplay of these natural characteristics” (Ewert 439). Essentially, bioregionalism is a political articulation of the spiritual philosophy of nature which Snyder has expressed throughout his literary career. Bioregionalism takes Snyder’s deep ecology and gives it a political context by suggesting that our politics ought to be influenced by these bioregional concerns — concerns which are as central to humans as they are to the “natural” world. In an interview with *Mother Earth Magazine*, Snyder states that strengthening ties to our local communities and environment “would enable us to tune our local societies more precisely to the natural resources that are already in place, and to form our human communities and associations more appropriately to the natural communities. It's a step toward actually asserting the unity of the tree and bird communities with the human.”

Snyder embraces this philosophy of bioregionalism in his personal life. Though he lives isolated on a ranch in the Sierra Nevada, Snyder nonetheless maintains a close bond with his neighbors. In his profile on Gary Snyder in *The Guardian*, James Campbell describes Snyder’s relationship with the residents of Nevada City, a small town some thirty miles away from Snyder’s ranch. “Greeted on all sides as he makes his way along the main street, reminiscent of Wild West film sets, Snyder has time for everyone,” Campbell states. Snyder describes his neighbors as “pretty self-sufficient, though we all cooperate and lend each other things” (Campbell). This intimate communal bond reflects Snyder’s belief in the importance of remaining in touch with both our biological and human neighbors. Through activism, Snyder expands the application of bioregionalism beyond his personal life to include a concern for his home state of California. In “Coming into the Watershed: Biological and Cultural Diversity in the California Habitat,” Snyder questions existing

political boundaries that divide the state. He suggests that natural boundaries in line with the existing environmental biomes would foster greater concern for the health of nature and encourage a more intimate relationship between humans and the natural world. He asks, “What is this ‘California?’ It is, after all, a recent human invention with straight-line boundaries that were drawn with a ruler on a map and rushed off to an office in D.C. The political boundaries of the Western states were established in haste and ignorance. Landscapes have their own shapes and structures, centers and edges, which must be respected” (77). What was once a philosophy expressed in the intimate setting of the Six Gallery reading in 1955, and later expressed through spiritual nature poetry, then applied to Snyder’s personal life with his family and community, has now expanded to a truly unique political framework from which Snyder seeks to shift common perceptions of the wild.

At a time when the environmental movement has framed climate change and environmental degradation as an “us versus them” issue, Snyder’s voice is especially relevant. Rather than targeting global institutions, multinational corporations, and governments, Snyder’s rhetoric focuses on people. Snyder does indeed see these institutions as the enemy, but he believes the solution lies within the people who compose these institutions — the average citizen, who must learn to see himself as innately wild and inherently tied to the natural environment. Until we fully understand our symbiotic relationship with nature and see ourselves as part of larger natural and human communities, we will continue to degrade and destroy the environment. Snyder’s poetic activism reminds us that the streams, the rivers, the wind, the waves — nature’s gentle pulse — are “Flowing Free! / With you, / in me.”

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