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Gary Snyder's poetry often is concerned with the ecology, especially the relationship between nature and society. Snyder does not view nature and civilization as separate entities. In his poems he sees them as two parts of a whole. They are often out of balance rather than being a stable, harmonious whole.

Born in San Francisco in 1930, Gary Snyder grew up in Washington State. He earned a degree in literature and anthropology from Reed College in Oregon and eventually wound up back in the Bay Area. One summer he worked as a member of the trail crew at Yosemite National Park. Around that same part of his life he became involved with the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beats (*No Nature* 391).

I will focus in this paper on poems from Snyder's book *No Nature* (1992) and emphasize his concern for nature from political and spiritual points of view. Often the political and spiritual elements are both present, so I will begin with one such poem, "The Arts Council Meets in Eureka" (1986), to present an example of the kind of poems that Snyder writes.

1. The Politics of Ecology

"The Arts Council Meets in Eureka" is not so well known, but it is a paradigmatic work. It is primarily a political poem, but it has a spiritual aspect as well.

On the one hand, "The Arts Council" is a statement criticizing those who would destroy the environment:

Eureka by the bay
a nuclear power plant; heaps of chips,
the sawmills
the heaped up kerf
of mountainsides of logs.
stand at the edge of sea air fog (347)

In the first stanza he talks about driving to a meeting in Eureka in California and camping along the way. In the second stanza he states that:

Next day saw the tallest tree of all:
clapped our hands and asked for longer life. (347)

This is a kind of Shinto ritual in which one wishes for good luck or health. Perhaps this ritual and camping in the great outdoors rather helped him deal mentally with the sight of a nuclear power plant, sawmill, and apparent logging or construction work in the town, as described above.

Despite Snyder's sense of dismay at the end, this poem is almost serene in comparison with "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" (1967). "Revolution" is one of his most polemical poems, but it has an ironic side that brings a sense of balance to his vision of society and nature. We could call this poem "The Ecological Manifesto," as opposed to Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Snyder for his part views nature—"animals, trees, water, air, grasses" (183) —as having rights just like humans.

Instead of the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship of the proletariat Snyder states a bit tongue in cheek that:

We must pass the stage of
"Dictatorship of the Unconscious" (183)

He longs in the poem for the "true Communionism" (183). He may mean by this an ideal society in which humans share with each other and live in harmony with other people and nature. I assume that by "Unconscious" Snyder refers to something positive like the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the people.

The poet implies here that human rationalism is responsible for social and ecological problems:

If the abstract rational intellect
is the exploiter, the masses is the unconscious. (183)

So-called rationalism to him is the cause of many crises. Rationalism would maintain that polluting the environment for the sake of making a profit is an acceptable thing to do. Snyder wants the environment to be protected, just as we protect the lives of humans.

"Front Lines" (1969) is another poem in which Snyder depicts the conflict between nature and humanity with all its machinery.

Snyder begins by talking about logging:

The deer winter here
A chainsaw growls in the gorge. (218)

Then he talks about the trees getting a break after days of decimation:

Ten wet days and the log trucks stop,
The trees breathe. (218)

After the break somebody from the realty company in a "4-wheel jeep" (218) brings in customers that Snyder calls "Landseekers, lookers" (218) to show them the real estate there.

At this point, Snyder decries the metaphorical sickness of the United States:

Every pulse of the rot at the heart
In the sick fat veins of Amerika (218)

Indeed, in the first line of the poem Snyder again uses the image of illness:

The edge of the cancer
Swells against the hill (218)

He regards American society as sick to the extent that it is making the environment just as ill—something like an epidemic of pollution and destruction.

The next stanza is quite graphic:

Slipsliding and belching on top of

The skinned-up bodies of still-live bushes (218)

Snyder makes American capitalism with all its machinery sound as if it is at war with nature. His negative perspective on machines is a frequent motif in his poetry.

The end of the poem serves as a statement both of hope and defiance:

Behind is a forest that goes to the Arctic
And a desert that still belongs to the Piute
And here we must draw
Our line (218)

Snyder wants to somehow protect these two remaining sites of natural beauty. Here we can see Snyder's outlook on nature in relation to politics or ecopolitics. His ideal would be a society that does not just cater to humans but one that respects and includes nature.

2. The Spiritual Side of Ecology

Snyder has written a number of poems and other works of a spiritual nature; he often mixes political themes into such poems, especially environmental concerns as in "The Arts Council Meets in Eureka."

It would be useful to first examine Snyder's poem "What You Should Know to Be a Poet" (1967). In it he offers advice to budding poets, in the process revealing his own approach to writing and his view of life in general.

First Snyder states that the aspiring poet needs to know about nature, even the whole universe. He says that the poet should know:

all you can about animals as persons.
The names of trees and flowers and weeds.
names of stars, and the movements of the planets
and the moon.

your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind. (184)

Snyder additionally states that you have to know about magic, such as divination or astrology—not to mention dreams. He goes on to assert that the poet should know about demons, angels, and love. He says that the poet should “love the human: wives husbands and friends” (184).

Snyder would like the poet to be in touch with everyday matters like:

> children’s games, comic books, bubble-gum,
> the weirdness of television and advertising.
>
> work, long dry hours of dull work swallowed and accepted
> and livd with and finally lovd. (184)

In the last part of his poem Snyder recommends:

> the wild freedom of the dance,
> silent solitary illumination (184)

That is to say, the poet should feel free about life and be natural, but be willing to take risks:

> real danger. gambles. and the edge of death. (184)

It is interesting to note that Snyder starts off in his advice to budding poets by saying that they should know about nature, magic, gods, and the like. He thinks the poet should know about all aspects of life and experience everything possible, but he seems to emphasize nature and metaphysics. Due to the influence of Buddhism on Snyder, he thinks of everything in life as connected, a unity of spirit and matter.[1]

Sometimes Snyder creates a kind of metamyth when he writes about spiritual or environmental matters. That is, he makes a myth without necessarily believing in it in a literal way. I will examine two cases of this approach in his writing.

The first example is “Prayer for the Great Family” (1969) in which Snyder expresses his great appreciation for nature. He begins by thanking Earth:

> Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day—

and to her soil: rich, rare and sweet
in our minds so be it. (223)

The last line above must mean that when Snyder thanks nature, the various elements and the like appear like a family in his imagination.

Snyder goes on to express his appreciation to plants:

. . . the sun-facing, light-changing leaf
and fine root-hairs (223)

Continuing, Snyder thanks "Wild Beings"—animals—for "teaching/ secrets, freedoms, and ways" (223). The same goes for water:

. . . clouds, lakes, rivers, glaciers;
holding or releasing; streaming through all
our bodies salty seas (223)

Snyder then expresses his gratitude to the sun:

. . . blinding pulsing light through
trunks of trees, through mists, warming caves where
bears and snakes sleep—he who wakes us (223)

In the last stanza Snyder shows his respect to the sky. He seems fascinated that it holds:

. . . billions of stars—and goes beyond that—
beyond all powers, and thoughts (224)

He means that the Sky is all matter but is closely aligned with the Mind, perhaps meaning the spiritual realm.

This poem is in fact inspired by a Mohawk prayer. Snyder has great admiration for Native American culture, religion, and mythology. This vision of the Earth and the universe as one family in the poem above fits in with Snyder's idea of communing with nature.

Turtle Island (1969) is the title of one of Snyder's collections of poetry and is another case of his use of a metamyth. In the introduction to the book, he calls North America "Turtle Island, a tribute to Native Americans and others who have lived on this continent: Turtle Island—the old/new name

for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia" (204). Snyder hopes that we may see ourselves "more accurately" (204) as part of a long history. Rather than the name "U.S.A." he prefers Turtle Island, a creation myth that is "an idea found world-wide, of the earth, or cosmos even, sustained by a great turtle or serpent-of-eternity" (204). Snyder wants Americans to see themselves more fairly and objectively, with an awareness of other cultures and of people that have inhabited America, in addition to a sense of consideration for the environment.

In the last part of the introduction Snyder refers to the planet as a "living being" (204). He goes on to proclaim that: "Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions—African, Asian, or European" (204). He envisions a multicultural, biodiverse country and planet.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the spiritual and political merge in many of Snyder's poems. His sense of morality with regard to society and the environment are closely connected with his Buddhist background and his interest in Japan and Native American beliefs.

A recurrent motif in Snyder's poetry is machinery and the unwelcome threat that machines have become to the environment. The presence of the machinery gives an apocalyptic sense to his poems. This tendency may have been influenced by the nuclear madness of the Cold War and its aftermath. We can see this in poems like "Vapor Trails" (1957) :

> Twin streaks twice higher than cumulus,
> Precise plane icetracks in the vertical blue
> Cloud-flaked light-shot shadow-arcing
> Field of all future war, edging off to space (105)

This is an apocalyptic vision of a future nuclear war.

Despite his awareness of destruction and danger in general, Snyder is cautiously optimistic, as in "For the Children" (1969). At the end of the poem he has this advice about the future for everyone and their children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light (259)

He means that we will need to cooperate with each other and live in harmony with each other to survive. "*Learn the flowers*" means that we should learn about nature instead of just mindlessly trying to control it.

In closing, I should note that Snyder's view of the environment is not just influenced by Buddhism or other belief systems. He is also a kind of "eco-romantic," feeling a deep connection with nature, putting him in the tradition of the English Romantics and American Transcendentalists, especially Thoreau. Snyder's ideal is for humans to live in common with animals, trees, plants, the Earth, seas, and sky.[2]

Since the sixties on, it has become popular to refer to Earth or Mother Nature as Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess. Some even view Gaia as a living organism. In speaking of communing with nature, Snyder has embraced Gaia. This notion is reminiscent of Thoreau writing in *Walden* (1854): "I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself" (73).

Notes

1. Cf. Mark Gonnerman's *A Sense of the Whole: Reading Gary Snyder's Mountains and Rivers Without End*, which explores Snyder's Buddhist views of, and related approaches to, life and nature by examining Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996).
2. For further analysis of Snyder's literary roots, see Paige Tovey's *The Transatlantic Eco-Romanticism of Gary Snyder* (2013), which describes the author's relationship to the English Romantics—Wordsworth and

Blake—and Transcendentalists—Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.

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