

## GARY SNYDER'S ZEN BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TO NATURE AS PROJECTED IN HIS POETIC REALM: A BRIEF NOTE

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### **An Abstract**

*Poetry is a profound expression of life through the medium of language Gary Snyder, one of the most admired American poets of today can be called as a mature poet with a sense of religious and mystical involvement like the poet of romantic age who describes Nature as a vehicle for their poetic treatment emotionally and imaginatively. This paper deeply examines Snyder's feelings of love and sympathy for the world of nature and it substantiates the statement that the poet Snyder in the spirit of romantic poet understands man in terms of nature and nature in terms of man.*

Gary Snyder's status as both a counter figure and an innovative and important mainstream poet places him in a unique place in contemporary American literature. Having received extensive serious scholarly attention from all literary circles, his literary work is seen to embody the influence of such great literary giants as Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Being the recipient of several literary honours and awards including a 'Pulitzer Prize' for poetry for his poetry collection *Turtle Island* (1974), his reputation as a significant poet, author and critic is largely secure and commendable.

Born on May 8, 1930 in San Francisco, California as the first of the two children to Herold and Lois Snyders. He grew up in the Pacific Northwest where his father had a dairy farm and was raised on small farms, first in Washington and later in Oregon and held various jobs as a logger, seaman, fire lookout and United States Forest service train crew worker. His interest in American Indian culture led him to acquire degrees in literature and anthropology at Reed College and pursued his interest in Asian thought and culture by studying Oriental languages at University of California at Berkeley. He was involved both in the 'Beat Movement' and Zen Buddhism. The influence of Eastern literature and philosophy and Snyder's application of Zen Buddhism to Western Culture are perhaps the most distinguishing characteristics of his poetry. His writing reveals an appreciation for the hard work of rural life and closeness it affords with nature, an interest in the spiritual link between primitive cultures and nature and a deep sense of involvement with humanity. Publication of **Riprap (1959), Myths and Texts (1960) The Back Country (1967),** major collection of poetry namely **Regarding Wave (1969), Turtle Island and Axe Handles (1983)** brought him honour, name and fame in the current literary scenario from all quarters. With his clear and incisive grasp of basic issues, Snyder belongs with "such native American writers as Emerson and Thoreau, or with poets like Whitman and Frost, in whom poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom", living a simple contemplative life far from cities and close to his beloved mountains" (Sharma 49). From his early days, he cultivated a close communion with Nature and sung in glory of her benign influence as an inseparable part of his life. "From a very early age", says Snyder, "I found myself standing in an undefinable awe before the natural world" (Perkins 583).

Living in such a rural atmosphere has largely determined his mental outlook. The philosophical bent of the mind of a man is generally influenced by the area in which he lives. For example, all Romantic Poets lived in the Lake District very much nourished by inspiring natural surroundings. This shows that rural surroundings leave a healthy impact on the mind of a man. Snyder has lived amidst mountains and seen the value of life in terms of his experiences of wanderings around mountains and forests. His primal interest was in 'exploring the forests around Portland and Oregon where he developed his attachment to nature and learned "self-reliance, discipline and the rugged ways of the American West, which sustain him to this day and which frequently appear as the subject matter of his poetry" (Bob Steuding 17).

In Gary Snyder, says R.K. Sharma, Nature emerges as a major theme. It is his single-minded quest for values expressed in lyrical terms, especially in the context of nature that gives him relevance" (P 44). No doubt, "Snyder's poems teach us to see nature and how to see ourselves in nature, not through discursive or didactic argument but by dramatizing states of mind that pose an alternative to the culture and ego-driven attitudes by which we normally live" (Kern 158). Snyder is often linked with some Western writers like John Muir, Robinson Jeffers and Frank Waters. These men with Snyder share a certain feeling for western nature that shapes their ultimate philosophical view of reality and also importantly, their value judgements on civilization, American Technological Civilization to be more exact. Their starting point is 'nature'. Gary Snyder himself said once: "My poems, on one level, call the society's attention to its ecological relationship in nature" (Real Work 4).

In the poetic realm of Gary Snyder, 'Nature' has a vital role to play. Before getting into the details of his love of nature, it will be interesting to examine whether Snyder can be called nature poet with a sense of religious and mystical involvement like that of Wordsworth or merely a poet whose poems describe nature as a vehicle for his poetic treatment. First of all, let us review some of the varying opinions expressed by critics regarding Snyder as a nature poet. Bob Steuding who has made a significant contribution to Snyder criticism remarks that Snyder like Ezra Pound sought the "real" in his poetry of nature" (P40). Robert Kern calls "Snyder as the ecological poet par excellence" (P158), while Sharma says as: "Snyder sees nature, the wilderness, as a corrective to the influence of a predominantly urban and highly mechanised civilization" (P50). Snyder himself stated in an interview that "on one level, he sought to inculcate an awareness of the natural environment. It is a problem of love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it... man's life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems"

Anyhow, whatever be the opinions expressed by Snyder critics and Snyder himself, it is clear that Snyder has a lot to do with nature and nature does play a significant role in his poetry. To illustrate his unacknowledged involvement with the world of nature, one can read such poems as 'Dawn', 'Thin ice' 'Burning island', 'The wild Edge', "Burning" 'Fire in the Hole' "Song of the cloud" and many others.

The poem "Thin Ice" is an attempt at experiencing a particular aspect of Nature in a thrilling and sensational manner. The speaker is found in a logging road below Smash Mountain. The speaker surveys the fields and experiences the warmth of the warm day. The following lines from "Thin Ice" attest to the fact that the speaker becomes alive to all things around in nature:

"Like thin Ice – the sudden  
Feel of an old phrase made real –  
Instant of frozen leaf,  
Ice water, and staff in hand"

Snyder is held under the grip of a new sensational awareness. The poet says that an old phrase is made real. Until the experience comes, everything is hazy and cloudy. But once the experience comes, the haziness disappears. The old phrase is made real. The sense is that the speaker establishes an intense contact with the thin ice and enjoys an experience of intimacy and complete union with it. The thin ice broke and the speaker dropped eight inches inside it. This shows that Snyder is a gay observer of Nature. He is inside and outside it. This means that Snyder establishes a profound identification with objects of Nature like 'thin ice'.

The Romantic poets observed nature and imaginatively participated in its mystery. Snyder is a little different from the usual romantic mode of participation. One can imaginatively share kinship with nature. Snyder goes deeper. He wants to participate in the mystery of nature physically, emotionally and imaginatively. There are multiple levels in his mode of participation. He regards physical oneness and intimacy with nature as having greater value. Wordsworth spoke of entering into the life of objects by way of empathy and imagination. Snyder actually enters with the life of objects. By experiencing Nature face to face, one can see the glory of nature. One reason why Snyder is forced to develop interest in achieving physical oneness with nature is largely attributable to his eco-mystical outlook. The romantics spoke of only inward participation but Snyder speaks of both kinds of participation, inward and outward and thereby he becomes much more comprehensive in his attitude to nature than the romantic poets. Romantic mysticism is predominantly inward whereas Snyder's nature mysticism is equally inward but it remains firmly attached to the outward aspects like wandering around mountains and valleys, drinking water from the streams, cutting the woods and getting his legs drenched in snow and ice.

Even Snyder's belief in God is based upon kinship with nature. The poem "This Tokyo" may be cited an example:

"--- highest Dantean radiance of the God  
or endless Light or Life or Love  
or simple tinsel angel in the  
Candy heaven of the poor –  
Mental, divinity or beauty all –  
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Is earthquake rot and matter mental  
Trembling, freedom is a void  
Peace war religion resolution  
Will not help (The Back Country 80)

The entire nature is a spiritually animating force. Many men in moments of calmness perceive this power hidden in nature. A concrete experience of touch and perception in a state of communion with nature is what the fall of snow indicates as done in the poem "Tasting the Snow". Snyder projects himself into nature in order to discover the different levels and perceive the deeper presence of the divine hidden in it.

Snyder's reverence for nature implies that nature is alive embodying a deep divine meaning. He wants the old philosophers to pay attention to nature much more seriously because nature is a source of divine inspiration. For instance, he has this view expressed in these lines that follow:

"Chairman Mao, you should quit smoking  
Don't bother those philosophers  
Build dams, plant trees,  
don't kill flies by hand.  
Marx was another westerner.  
It's all in the head.  
You don't need the bomb.  
Stick to farming.  
Write some poems. Swim the river.  
those blue overalls are great.  
Don't shoot me, let's go drinking  
just wait" (To the Chinese Comrades 114)

In the poem "Beneath my Hand and Eye the Distant Hills", Snyder humanises nature and spiritualises it also. The distant mountains appear to assume a divine dimension. This is revealed in these lines:

As when vision idly dallies on the hills  
Loving what it feeds on  
Soft cinder cones and craters" (P123).

The poet sees a tremendous unfolding of power in the mountains. The mountain becomes a source of divine vision because in Snyder rocks, hills and mountains represent a tremendous form of life. The holy crystal wind is also divinised by Snyder who expresses so here in these lines:

"Smashed bits of cloud cross my vision,  
A holy crystal wind sweeps  
the translucent sea of the sky"  
(Spring and the Ashura 132)

The silent sea and the holy wind make the perversely wandering mind calm and tranquil. This means nature contains spiritual power to heal the divisions of the mind. A sensuous and concrete grasp of life and nature is more interesting to him than an abstract handling of them. This special feature is evidently echoed even in his earlier poems. One such example can be cited in the poem "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout":

Down Valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain  
Pitch glow on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
I cannot remember things I once read  
A few friends, but they are in cities  
Drinking Sold Snow-water from a tin-cup  
Looking down for miles  
Through high still air" (Riprap 1)

One can understand from this poem that the poet's response to nature is direct, concrete and sensuous. Like the Romantic poets, Snyder loves being alone with Nature. Poets, ideally speaking, are fascinated by nature and its different moods. As Russel Noyes puts it, "Some of the major Romanticists were most fascinated by nature's silence and solitude, as were

Wordsworth and Keats; others by its panorama and magnitude as was Byron; still others by nature's contrasting moods and combination of moods" (P xxxiii). Snyder feels highly elated and fascinated by all aspects of nature: silence, solitude, magnitude and all contrasting moods and phases. But whatever he does, he does with some objectivity. For example, when the poet experiences a mood of melancholy, nostalgia, silence and solitude in this poem, he is also conscious of his aim to capture a memorial moment in his mountain journey. Passing through the valley, experiencing heat and rain, seeing new flies, feebly remembering his books, and friends, drinking cold water from a tin-cup and surveying the entire mountain landscape create a beautiful pen-picture of realistic contact with nature. Snyder, like Wordsworth, is a lover of rocks and meadows and a small ramble near them makes him somewhat pensive like Wordsworth. Living in such deep union with nature introduces spontaneous impulses of self-discipline and self-restraint and makes the poet achieve total freedom from the dull monotony of human life.

In the words of Bruce Cook, "Snyder is a modern Thoreau, a sort of prophet of the essential in human life, and in his own way a great liberator"(P28). Snyder's power of observation and description deserves appreciation. The poem "Kyoto:March" may be cited as an example to glorify human life in all respects:

Beneath the roofs of frosty houses  
Lovers part, from tangle warm  
of gentle bodies under guilt  
And crack the icy water to the face  
and wake and feed the children  
And grandchildren that they love (Riprap 20)

It seems clear that in all descriptions of nature, human life is at the centre. The phrase 'Frosty house' reminds one of a picture of life lingering in a casual way without any excitement and tension. Though they are all romantic elements, the poet describes them in his own way without sacrificing his individuality.

In "Kyoto Born in Spring song" of **Regarding Wave** Snyder endows nature with an intense form of life and addresses all creatures as babies. This indicates the poet's attempt at humanizing the creatures. The whole motive lies in treating nature with reverence. The view that nature and all animated creatures are living beings finds its place in these lines:

Great Majesty of Dharma turning  
Great dance of Vajra Power  
Lizard baby by the fern  
Centipede baby Crambling toward the wall  
Cat baby left a mew for milk alone  
Mouse baby too afraid to run (Regarding Wave 18).

The Buddhist principle is that there is a superior law which makes everything a living being. The act of showing love and compassion towards all creatures springs from the view that nature has a deep divine and spiritual background. The entire poem "Burning island seems to be a powerful description of nature as God. According to Snyder, there are several powers which govern the forces of nature and so all elements. Earth, Air, Fire, Water become the varied manifestation of God. What is important to note here is that the whole poem "Burning Island" has a strong pantheistic vein. Wave is addressed as God in the following lines:

"O Wave God who broke through me today  
Sea Bream  
Massive pink and silver  
Cool swimming down with one  
Watching staying away from the spear (P23).

Wave is a particular part of nature. Snyder looks upon wave as a form of God as wave represents profound energy and dynamism. In the next stanza Snyder looks upon the sky as another manifestation of God. The lines given below make this clear:

O Sky Gods Cartwheeling  
Out of pacific

turning rainsqualls over like  
lids on us (23)

The sky represents vastness and massiveness. Vastness is an attribute of God and so sky becomes an appropriate manifestation of God. Then Snyder makes Earth Mother as an important deity. A few lines can be quoted from this poem "Burning Island" to justify this view:

Each night  
O Earth Mother  
I have wrapt my hand  
Over the jut of your cobra-hood sleeping

'Earth' provides a permanent source of satisfaction. It supports all living things. The main thrust of the stanza lies in regarding Earth as a loving mother.

Snyder sees the divine presence in birds and ants. Divine presence means the highest expression of life and nothing else. This is expressed in **The Wild Edge**:

Birds sail away and back  
-----  
Caravans of ants bound for the wall  
Wandering backward – C

Snyder pays attention to all forms of life. Birds and ants gain reverence in his scheme.

The poem "Water" is a profound manifestation of nature. All romantic poets treat water as a life – force. In Shakespeare, water is a symbol of fertility. In Coleridge, reference to water is very extensive mainly because it is treated as a life –source. Snyder is at once at home with all these trends and traditions. In the poem, he describes a certain experience in which he is driven to take shelter in water. The sun is shining very fiercely. Snyder is in a state of tiresomeness. He simply moves to a place full of pebbles. Small snakes are found moving about Heat is creating a great deal of fatigue (exhaustion) for the poet. All the rocks are very hot because of the hot sun and so it does not become a fit place for rest and relaxation:

"I leaped, laughing for little boulder-colorcoil-  
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" (Water 10)

Snyder treats water as an important manifestation of Nature. In the poem "Water", Snyder is concerned with the force and velocity of water. Water gains increased strength when it is found dashing against rocks. Rocks are solid but water is liquid. But this liquid water by a constant process of interplay gains the strength of an elephant in making the rocks round. Water acts as a principle of renewal for Snyder. Rocks are being reshaped. He turns to water as a source of mental consolation. His deep interest in Nature is reflected in his attitude towards water. Water smoothes everything and thereby it becomes an important source of life.

Snyder's whole poetic enterprise lies in discovering the deeper dimensions of Nature amidst valleys and mountains. This act involves a total detachment from the modern Industrial civilization based on reason and technology. Snyder is not against technology. He only pleads for the human element in everything. It is a kind of past time for Snyder to take a stroll round mountains and valleys. He is in touch with a real form of life which influences the whole being of man. The poem "Nooksack valley" should be studied in the light:

"At the far end of a trip north  
In a berry-pickers cabin

At the edge of a wide muddy field  
Stretching to the woods and cloudy mountains" (P15)

The line 'stretching to the woods and cloudy mountains' is Wordsworthian in tone and appeal. There is an element of strangeness and unfamiliarity expressed here in this line. Woods and mountains kindle in Snyder new memories and certain peculiar forms of awareness unconnected with the dry realities of life. A man's psyche becomes fully alive in such surroundings. The civilized man walks on the road while Snyder depth of a man is fully recovered in natural surroundings like high woods, cloudy mountains and muddy fields.

The richness of human life, according to Snyder, lies in intuitively perceiving the link between man and nature. The depth of being is revealed only in the realization of the relationship between man and nature. Snyder dissatisfaction with reason and his twenty-five years of search for a new dimension make him see a new meaning in the rock, tree and man. Snyder's interest in Nature is shown in his habit of extending love and sympathy to the animal world;

"----- The dog  
Turns and turns about  
Stops and sleeps"

The dog sleeping is a casual occurrence but this has a unique significance in his attitude to nature.

To conclude, Snyder has so constant admiration for nature, so profound an understanding of her and feels so subtle kinship with her that his attitude is one of real worship. Snyder's feelings of love and sympathy for the world of nature, sound belief in absolute and simultaneous equality among all existing being, aim at developing a close link between man and nature. In a nutshell, it may be said that the poet Snyder in the spirit of a romantic poet understands man in terms of nature and nature in terms of man.

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