

Gary Snyder and the Poetics of Symbiosis*

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism, an emergent literary discourse which addresses the ecological crisis, stresses the importance of transforming our ego consciousness into an eco-consciousness. If the nature writing of romantics and American transcendentalists still objectified Nature as a metaphysical absolute, recent environmental writing takes a more radically empirical perspective, beginning not from the (anthropocentric or even zoocentric) "self" but from the situation of being already-embodied, already within-nature, already dependent on the natural environment for its/our/the earth's (mutual) survival. Thus the *otherness* of the surrounding environment is now seen as being central to the formation of an organism's symbiotic identity. In a sense this otherness is also *wildness*, and the concept of wildness has become central to discussions of a perhaps collective eco-consciousness—a much more empirical, non-anthropocentric, "wilder" wildness than that of traditional nature writing. I will argue here that Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* sets forth ecological idea(l)s that can shape our contemporary environmental imagination and help us to forge a "culture of wildness." I also will interpret the Snyderian poetics of *symbiosis*—where symbiosis suggests the necessary and inevitable interweaving of ancient aboriginal and future high tech cultures, and of Eastern and Western thinking, as well as of organisms and environment—as a radically empirical extension of Thoreau's and Emerson's naturalist (and "universalist") poetics.

KEY WORDS

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The Natural Contract

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Such recently dominant literary-theoretical discourses as post-colonialism and globalization theory—or more generally, “cultural studies”—tend to draw heavily on history and the social sciences (sociology, economics, political science). Even psychoanalysis, psychoanalytically-based feminism and gender theory draw heavily from *another* social science, that of psychology. Although logic, epistemology and metaphysics are central to traditional (e.g. Kantian) aesthetics and also to “traditional” discussions of such modernist techniques as stream-of-consciousness (or even postmodernist techniques of parody and self-reflexivity), the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) remain largely ignored by (particularly contemporary) literary theory. Indeed, even traditional aesthetics or philosophy of art, according to Arnold Berleant, “has been directed to the arts and not to the natural world” (1). Yet, as Wordsworth lamented, “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours . . .”; that is, the historical and socio-cultural world has taken us too far *away* from that nature of which we were once very obviously a vital part, that earth upon which, beneath all the money- and commodity-based “getting and spending,” we ultimately depend for our very survival. Ecocriticism, we might say, begins with the assumption that our current literary and cultural studies are painfully, indeed dangerously, deficient in this respect.

In contemporary ecocritical thinking and environmental writing, an organism’s identity is seen not as a metaphysical principle (the “self” or “soul”) or (obviously) as a function of language-performance, but as a symbiotic event or process of interaction-formation. Thus the radical *otherness* of the surrounding environment is seen as being

central to identity-formation.¹ But this otherness is also *wildness*, and the concept of wildness has become central to discussions of a perhaps collective eco-consciousness—a much more empirical, non-anthropocentric, “wilder” wildness than that of traditional (romantic, transcendental) nature writing. I will argue here that Gary Snyder’s monumental treatise, *The Practice of the Wild*, sets forth ecological idea(l)s that can shape our contemporary environmental imagination and help us to forge a “culture of wildness.” I also will interpret the Snyderian *symbiosis* as the necessary and inevitable interweaving of ancient aboriginal and contemporary high-tech cultures, and of Eastern and Western thinking, as well as of organisms and environment; I will see Snyder’s poetics of symbiosis as a radically empirical extension of Thoreau’s and Emerson’s naturalist (and “universalist”) poetics.

I. Old and New, Thoreau and Snyder

In his seminal essay “Walking,” Thoreau redefines literature in relation to nature:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a *poet* who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their *primitive* senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them, — transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library, —aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. (167, my emphasis)

Here Thoreau is making more “radically empirical” Emerson’s notion in “The Poet” of the poet as a “namer of concrete things,” and of poetic language as the most physically concrete of languages:

All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to . . . reappear a new and higher fact. [The poet] uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form. This is true science. . . . By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things. . . . The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history. . . . The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it. . . . This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree." (*Emerson's Prose* 190)

In *Nature*, of course, Emerson has already given an example of the initial "poetic" meaning of words which we have now forgotten, that is, their function of directly picturing things: his first point about "Language" is that "Words are signs of natural facts. . . . Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*. . . . We say the *heart* to express emotion, the *head* to denote thought. . . ." (*Emerson's Prose* 35). This view of an original and more concrete "poetic language" to a degree echoes Vico; it predicts both Heidegger's *Sprache* as poetic Saying and Pound's tracing of the new imagist poetry, *via* Fenellosa, to its roots in Chinese ideographic language.²

But the most striking aspect of Emerson's "poet as namer of things" passage above is that it simultaneously points back to the past and ahead to the future. We are looking back to the origin of language, seeing "language" as "fossil poetry," but the guiding image is that of growth and metamorphosis: "naming" is "a second nature, grown out

of the first, as a leaf out of a tree"; "All of the facts of the animal economy . . . are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of a man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact." This metaphor of growth, whose future-orientation is rooted in the "place" of a past, is also clear in Thoreau's description of the writer "whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library" Thus while, unlike romanticism in the general sense, unlike Wordsworth's *pastist* approach that calls attention to the present social and cultural malaise by harking back (like Lao-tzu) to the good old days, Emerson grounds his new American cultural identity, at the opening of *Nature*, on this orientation-toward-future, this future is nonetheless one which springs out of the most "aboriginal" relation to the past:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations behold God and nature face to face, we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . [W]hy should we grope among the *dry bones of the past*. . . . The sun shines to-day also. . . . There are *new lands, new men, new thoughts*. (*Emerson's Prose 27*, my emphasis)

Emerson is distinguishing what he sees as the new American "religion of Nature" from the British (and European, Old World) "religion of the Book." This is a discourse simultaneously poetic, spiritual and socio-political; Thoreau is much more personal and individualistic in tone when he echoes the line about the "sun" at the end of *Walden*: "The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."³ Emerson then at the opening of *Nature* is undoubtedly attacking that Old-World orientation-toward-past as an orientation toward, a stifling and stagnating embedment within, history, tradition, "culture." Yet the new (American) religion he is looking for, this "original relation to the universe" as religion-of-the-future, also

looks back to the past and indeed to a much more *ancient*, more *primitive* past: "The foregoing generations"—that is, before there were Bibles and perhaps even "writing"—"beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes." While this is an implicit attack on the "patriarchal" notions of "fathers," "biographies," "histories" and "criticism" from the perspective of American nature-writers and self-reliant wilderness poets as latecomers (even in the Bloomean sense), it is also a gesture back toward the pre-patriarchal and pre-European (pre-Western) fathers, toward those aboriginal peoples of the earth who are our true fathers. We need to keep this in mind when contemplating the opposite strain in Emerson, the push toward present and future:

Perhaps the time is already come. . . . Our day of *dependence*, our long *apprenticeship* to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that *poetry* will revive and lead in a *new age*. . . . (*Emerson's Prose* 56, my emphasis)

Like Emerson, perhaps even more passionately than Emerson, Thoreau envisions a future based on an idea of "the wild" from which will emerge new conditions of possibility, a vision of the future which in one sense must cut the umbilical cord between the old and the new, now figured as the cord or road connecting East and West:

We go *eastward* to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go *westward* as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethan stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions. ("Walking" 158, my emphasis)

At first glance East and West here appear to be antithetical, representing an absolute rift between culture and nature, a gulf crossed

by the "Lethan stream" of the Atlantic which makes all voyagers forget where they have been. Metaphorically this European Old World is full of patriarchal, *ossified* notions of "art and literature" whereas the American West is the zero-degree of nature-writing endowed with a *new* spirit of "enterprise and adventure." The idea of "wildness" counters that of the great tradition—the European hegemonic, global-cultural imagination. "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild" ("Walking" 162); "[I]n Wildness is the preservation of the world" (162); "Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure" (163); "I would have everyman so much like a wild antelope" (163); "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest" (163); "Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!" (164); "In literature it is only the wild that attracts us" (166). In other words, Thoreau's concept of literature is fundamentally rooted in "the wild" and "the primitive," a foil to European cultural supremacy.

Yet what does Thoreau really mean by "wild" here? His "wild" is still too "Natural"—thinking now of "Natural" in the light of the idealized (and perhaps capitalized, commodified) "Nature" of European and American Romanticism and Transcendentalism—and not yet "wild" enough; its "wildness" is still a too-idealized, too-romanticized one. We might say Thoreau's wildness is not yet as wild as Snyder's because, like Emerson, Thoreau fails to go *far enough* back into the past in order to leap further into the future—he does not really, does not objectively, anthropologically, *empirically* go back to that aboriginal past implied by Emerson's first-comers who have an "original relationship to the universe." Or, to put it another way, perhaps Thoreau's wild is not yet wild enough because, like Emerson, he does not go so far West that he ends up (back) in the East. For in remembering that the "wildest" civilizations are and were the oldest or most primitive ones, the tribal societies of native peoples, "aborigines," we inevitably will think of the Native Americans, who "originally" came from Northeast Asia. Then we would need to reread Thoreau's image of moving from West to East—which for him meant moving from American nature back to Old World culture—as meaning just the opposite, the move from aboriginal nature to Western (and

quintessentially American) culture, civilization, late-capitalist high technology.

This is indeed the “sense” or “orientation” of east-to-west we seem to implicitly get in Snyder’s “The Call of the Wild,” whose 80-year-old speaker is a Californian Catholic. He has phoned the state government, encouraging it to wage a war against coyotes which will also destroy their habitats, the cedar trees and the insects that live on them:

The Government finally decided / To wage the war all-out. Defeat / is Un-American. / And they took to the air . . . / And they never came down, / for they found, / the ground / is pro-Communist. And dirty. / And the insects side with the Viet Cong. / So they bomb and they bomb / Day after day, across the planet . . . / All these Americans up in a special city in the sky / Dumping poisons and explosives. / *Across Asia first, / And next North America, / A war against earth. / When it’s done there’ll be / no place / A coyote could hide.* (*Turtle Island* 22, my emphasis)

For the American pilots to dump their “poisons and explosives. / Across Asia first, / And next North America” suggests a move from the Far (or perhaps we ought to begin with the Middle) East “back” to the West which, countering Thoreau’s cross-Atlantic journey to the West, also subtly repeats the long-ago diaspora of Northern Asians, their journey eastward from Siberia to Alaska. In America, then, this paradoxical crossing of East/West is located precisely in the culture of the Native Americans. Perhaps “back home” in the world’s sole superpower, as in any of the other “developed economies” of the world, any movement into a new, more ecologically-conscious, earth-friendly future must inevitably combine whatever “new” technologies are “out there” with a wisdom based on the study of those aboriginal peoples who still live so much closer to nature, to the earth than we will ever be able to understand.

II. Nature, the Wilderness, and Snyder's "Wild"

Compared to Snyder, then, Thoreau for all his "wildness" may have been still, in many ways, like Emerson an upper middle-class white man, indeed a "Boston Transcendentalist" who did not himself feel very close to, or comfortable with, Native Americans. Ramsey shows that, though Thoreau was editing *The Maine Woods* on his deathbed (and uttered among his last words, according to friend W. E. Channing, "moose . . . Indian . . ."), the attitude he takes toward his Abenaki Indian guides in Maine Woods is equivocal at best: he speaks of the "wild barbarian sounds" of these "first people," a language of which "I understood not a single word" (Ruoff 52). No doubt "the wild" is also the deepest, darkest, most repressed part of the white American racial and cultural unconscious, the fearful dark underside to the dominant European-American "white consciousness." Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* grounds this dark underside in the repressed and guilt-ridden history of black slavery in the South. But the Native Americans were on the continent long before either the whites or the blacks, and may (through their own repressed culture and history) embody that most fearful, barbarian, "pagan" side of white Americans to which Hawthorne alludes in "Young Goodman Brown": "Scattered, too, among their pale-faced enemies, were the Indian priests, or powows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft" (Baym 1: 1204). And we can easily imagine that Thoreau's attitude toward the natives was, like Hawthorne's, still not very far from that romanticizing, idealizing, thus ultimately detached attitude of Freneau in "Indian Burial Ground," a view which still assumes this "dark racial unconscious" as shadowy illusion: "And long shall timorous fancy see / The painted chief, and pointed spear, / And Reason's self shall bow the knee / To shadows and delusions there" (Baym 1: 808).

Snyder's "coyote" poem, on the other hand, here looking forward where Freneau's is looking back, implies that it is really the white capitalist military-industrial complex that is "wild" in the sense of

violent, if not indeed in the sense (Hawthorne's) of "evil," for the "wildness" of native (aboriginal) cultures, given its close proximity to the earth, is a very *peaceful* kind of wildness.⁴ A young Blackfoot man, Jamake Highwater, discusses the different meanings "nature" has for Native Americans and for the dominant White American culture:

I grew up in a place that was called a wilderness, but I could never understand how that amazing ecological park could be called "wilderness," something wild that needs to be harnessed. Nature is some sort of foe, some sort of adversary, in the dominant culture's mentality. . . . I grew up in a culture that considers us literally a part of the entire process that is called nature. . . . I saw my first wilderness, as I recall, one August day when I got off a Greyhound bus in a city called New York. (Wegmann 6)

The term "ecological park" says it all: for native peoples who live close to nature, nature is a very warm, peaceful, human, civilized "home"; thus Snyder says that "Nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*" (*The Practice* 7). For Snyder "wilderness" differs from "wildness." "Wilderness is a *place* where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order" (*The Practice* 12). Wildness is a broader concept because it is associated with a psychological state of mind: "[o]ur bodies are wild" (16); "[t]he depths of mind, the unconsciousness are our inner wilderness areas" (16); both the body and the mind are "wild" (16); language is wild and the power to master it remains "on the side of the wild" (17). In *Turtle Island* Snyder says that "Wildness is the state of complete awareness" and that "That's why we need it" (99). Thus "wild land" can also become "sacred land" (*Practice* 78), for "the source of fertility is the 'wild'" (*Practice* 90), just as the consciousness of this wildness may become a sacred consciousness, the poetry that sings it a "sacred poetry." Still, we cannot absolutely separate the notion of "wildness" from that of the "wilderness," for neither is a fixed and totalizing concept.

Snyder says in *The Practice of the Wild*: "Thoreau says 'give me a

wildness no civilization can endure.' That's clearly not difficult to find. It is harder to imagine a civilization that wildness can endure, yet this is just what we must try to do. Wildness is not just the "preservation of the world," it *is* the world (6).⁵ If Thoreau's "Nature" is still a romanticized and transcendentalized one, in the sense that his external landscape is metamorphosed into an internal mindscape, in Snyder's hands "nature" becomes more purely "wild" but we also can no longer distinguish this wildness (and thus this "nature") from the "world" itself. Thus we need a "culture of wildness." But what this "wild culture" and "wild world" really mean is that now we are looking at the real empirical or material relations between organisms in their own (and thus also in our own) natural environment(s): we are looking at the real "social"—that is, biological, symbiotic—contracts living organisms make with one another. For the natural world as real world as wild world is the radically empirical and pragmatic world of survival: "In the wild a baby Black-tailed Hare gets maybe one free chance to run across a meadow without looking up" (4); in this world the *compact* between a coyote and a ground squirrel is a matter of life-and-death to both of them.

This wildness is also true freedom, understood in relation to the life-death struggle and life's ultimate contingency: "To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions as they are—painful, impermanent, open, imperfect—and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us. For in a fixed universe there would be no freedom" (*Practice* 5). One of the things which is radically free in Snyder's conception here, and thus too unfixed, impermanent, contingent, is of course the (human, plant, animal) "self." Symbiotic "contracts" are not so much required as *always-already-existing*. Again it would be easy to contrast such a (perhaps Nietzschean) view of freedom with the more idealistic, anthropocentric, "human-social" views of freedom which prevailed in the Enlightenment and the following period of European romanticism and American transcendentalism.

Serres points out in *The Natural Contract* that the emphasis on individual selfhood and possessiveness—on the part of any species, but

we will think first of the human species—is in effect the source of pollution:

I've often remarked that, just as certain animals piss on their territory so that it says theirs, many men mark and dirty the things they own by shitting on them, in order to keep them, or shit on other things to make them their own. This stercoraceous or excremental origin of property rights seems to me a cultural source of what we call pollution, which, far from being an accidental result of involuntary acts, reveals deep intentions and a primary motivation. (33)

In other words, “we must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect; where knowledge would no longer imply property, nor action mastery, nor would property and mastery imply their excremental results and origins” (*The Natural Contract* 38). Unlike the Enlightenment conception of a “social contract” based on anthropocentric thinking, on the cultural logic of human individuals joined in a human society—essentially the thinking, the “cultural logic” of Emerson and even Thoreau—this “natural contract” would be based on the symbiosis or reciprocity of humans and the natural environment. It would make possible the introduction of “natural interactions” into the world of “social interactions.” Serres argues that the Earth “can speak to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, which is enough to make a contract, and that each of the partners in symbiosis owes, by rights, its life to the other” (39).⁶ Thus the social contract that recognizes only human signatories—legal subjects—should be extended to include virtual and natural subjects. But the key point here is selflessness, selfless love or compassion for “the whole.” Snyder’s *ars poetica* stresses this idea:

My poems, on the one level call the society’s attention to ecological relationships in nature, and . . . in the individual

consciousness. Some of the poems show how society doesn't see its position in nature. What are we going to do with this planet? It's a problem of *love*, not the humanistic love of the West—but a love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it. Without this love, we can end, even without war, with an uninhabitable place. (*Real Work 4*, my emphasis)

Thus in the early seventies, Snyder in *Turtle Island* (1974) urged readers to seek a new definition of global humanism and global democracy that would include the representation of the *nonhuman*, an urge still now largely ignored by the mainstream culture.⁷ The difficult conception of the non-human is of course closely tied to the non-self, or at least the open-self. In *No Nature* Snyder says:

Nature also means the physical universe, including the urban, industrial, and toxic. But we do not easily *know* nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (*No Nature v*)

III. East and West in Snyder's Poetics

Snyder sees poetry as essentially *voice*, and thus as essentially the ancient and native oral tradition. In all aboriginal cultures of the earth poetry—something which transcended individual poets—essentially sang the sacredness of the land and of the mind in/of the land. It "sang nature," sang the (human) community in/of nature, in/of the cosmos:

Now I like to think that the concern with the planet, with the integrity of the biosphere, is a long and deeply-rooted concern of the poet for this reason: the role of the singer was to sing the voice

of corn, the voice of the Pleiades, the voice of bison, the voice of antelope. To connect in a very special way with 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. (*The Old Way* 36–37, my emphasis)

Snyder's poetry is therefore, more specifically, clearly part of the oral tradition of Native American literature with its focus on a spiritual "oneness with nature, the oneness of mind and body, the oneness of consciousness and unconscious, our oneness in society with each other. These are basic and ancient conditions from which we flourish" (*Real Work* 157).⁸ For Snyder, "Poetry is the vehicle of the mystery of voice. The universe . . . is a vast breathing body" (118).

Traditional or holistic "healing," then, becomes a central purpose of Snyder's "ethnopoetics"; the indigenous peoples themselves can have recourse to these songs, and through them be reconnected to the land, given a sense of place; at stake is cultural as well as individual survival. In a certain way Snyder's ethnopoetics (combining myth, folktales, ballads, epic and lyric "poetry") reminds us of Emerson's (and Thoreau's) "original poetic language" as a language which *names the things directly*; it was in his theory of poetic or "natural" language that Emerson, and following him Thoreau, most nearly went *all* the way back into the past, into the thinking of actual aboriginal peoples living close to the earth. But Snyder combines Thoreau with Whitman inasmuch as the ancient voice of the community is inevitably a sort of *epic* voice, singing the whole tribe, its culture, history and religion. Thus Snyder is all too happy to allow "the voice of nature" (107) or "the voice from the wilderness" to speak through and for him.⁹

Yet a language that "names nature" is necessarily a "universal" one, and as a member of the Beat Generation Snyder also spurned "the unfeeling Protestant-Catholic-Jewish faith of Eisenhower's icy-hearted American" and also "looked to the East for spiritual inspiration" (Tokinson 6–7). The crucial (if subtle and often implicit)

role of love and compassion in his poetry is clear, for instance, in his intertextual borrowing of Mirarepa's words—"The notion of emptiness engenders compassion" (ix)—in *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. The influence of East Asian Taoism and Buddhism cannot be over-emphasized in Snyder's thinking of "ecology" as "House-keeping on Earth." In *Earth House Hold* the poet states that "nature leads into nature—the wilderness—and the reciprocities and balances by which man lives on earth" (127), and that "the empirically observable *interconnectedness* of nature is but a corner of the vast 'jeweled net' which moves from without to within" (129; emphasis mine). This "jeweled net" is a clear reference to "Indra's net," an important trope—suggesting the inter-connected matrix of all things in which each infinitesimal part mirrors the infinite whole—in Indian Hinduism and Buddhism, and one which pervades Snyder's poetics of symbiosis.

In the epigraph of *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, Gary Snyder gives us the following *koan*:

An ancient Buddha said, "A painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger." Dōgen comments:

"There are few who have even seen this 'painting of a rice cake' and none of them has thoroughly understood it.

"The paints for painting rice-cakes are the same as those used for painting mountains and waters.

"If you said the painting is not real, then the material phenomenal world is not real, the Dhama is not real.

"Unsurpassed enlightenment is painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but painting.

"Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted nice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person." (ix)

This *koan* is one of the gateways to *satori* (enlightenment). Dōgen (1200–1253 C.E.), a founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, accepts "unsurpassed enlightenment" *via* the virtual, as the painting or the reading of sutras indicates, so as to show the pitfalls of

“the passion for the real.” In *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, “Old Bones,” “Macaques in the Sky,” and “Afloat” all express the overcoming of dualistic rationality, and thus resonate with “The Painted Rice Cake” and its parallel between a painting and the material phenomenal universe: “the entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but painting.” Snyder’s *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is an ekphrastic supplement to the painting, concretizing the Moebius-strip-like interpenetration between “poetry and painting” and “painting and poetry.” In “The Hump-back Flute Player,” this idea of interpenetration is represented cross-culturally:

The hump-back flute player
 Walks all over.
 Sits on the boulders around the Great Basin
 His hump is a pack.
 Hsüan Tsang
 went to India 629 AD
 returned to China 645
 with 657 sutras, images, mandalas,
 and fifty relics—
 a curved frame pack with a parasol,

 he carried
 “emptiness”
 he carried
 “mind only”
vijnaptimātra (79)

“The hump-back flute player” (Kokop’ele) and Hsüan Tsang are two cultural icons standing for the West and the East respectively. In his *Kokopelli Ceremonies*, Stephen W. Hill points out that kokop’ele has *polyptotonic* qualities: he is a hero with a thousand faces, a shapeshifter, a trickster, a storyteller, a Rain Priest, a fertility god, a deformed individual and even an insect (7). Hsüan Tsang, a famous Chinese Buddhist monk and translator, began journeying to India in

629 AD and came back with 657 Sanskrit sutras in 645 AD. Interestingly, the “hump-back” flute player, Hsüan Tsang with his “curved frame pack with a parasol,” and the curving, arching blue sky are all interconnected: the culture and history of the East converge with the West under the blue sky. In another poem, Snyder also invites us to ponder the rich meanings of “emptiness,” which means “interpenetration” in Snyder’s *oeuvre*:

“Eastward from here,
 beyond Buddha-worlds ten times as
 numerous as the sands of the Ganges
 there is a world called
 PURE AS LAPIS LAZULI
 its Buddha is called Master of Healing,
 AZURE RADIANCE TATHAGATA”

 East. Old Man Realm,
 East across the sea, yellow sand land
 Coyote Old Man land
 Silver, and stone blue . . . (40)

Anthony Hunt regards “The Blue Sky” as “an all-encompassing poem” that brings “East and West” together (*Genesis, Structure, Meaning* 103). Unlike T.S. Eliot, Snyder quotes without specifying the source. In this poem, “blue” has many associations: (1) empty space, (2) sky, (3) azure radiance *tathagata* (“suchness”)—the Medicine Buddha, (4) the “high blue tiles” at Nalada University where the logicians of emptiness discussed the meanings of the void (105). The prologue of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is about a Chinese landscape painting entitled “Endless Streams and Mountains.” At the top of the painting there is an empty space—the sky. As we read through the 39 poems, we find that “each entity, each place, is ‘empty’ of individuality” (Smith 7) and that the speaker’s journeys through these places “belong to the same emptiness, the ‘broad white space’” (9). “Emptiness” in this climactic poem “The Blue Sky” is a blending of the

Buddhist concept of emptiness, sutras, the painted space, the blue sky, the soundless music of Kokop'ele, the mythical "lapis lazuli" realm, and goddesses with blue hair. This emptiness then also means interconnectedness, interrelationship, interpenetration and interdependence. In another poem Snyder writes:

I pledge allegiance to the soil

 and to the beings who thereon dwell
 one ecosystem
 in diversity
 under the sun
 With joyful *interpenetration* for all.
 ("The Rediscovery" 462, my emphasis)

In this parody of the American "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag¹⁰—where "flag" suggests not just the patriotic nationalism of a potentially destructive imperialist superpower but, more generally, those abstract metaphysical ideals and thus those spirit-matter dualisms that Snyder would deconstruct—"interpenetration" is the symbiotic fusion of organisms with their common environment, the earth (or ultimately the cosmos) and thus with one another. The "ecologism" of Snyder's poetics of symbiosis involves the crossing-over of all boundaries, the interweaving of different life-forms and of different cultures, different conceptual schemes, different modalities—the interpenetration of East and West, actual and virtual, natural and cultural, country and city, personal and planetary, sacred and profane.

IV. Conclusion

At the opening of the 21st century our lingering colonial, imperialistic and patriarchal thinking, our tendency toward free and autonomous individualism, monoculturalism, anthropocentrism and egocentrism, are being attacked and subverted by various

poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses. In this arena the “symbiotic” discourse of ecocriticism, as expressed by poets like Snyder, is potentially the most subversive of all. In its fusion of theory with the most radical praxis, that of the survival of life on the planet, ecocriticism includes (and indeed foregrounds) the discourses of the natural sciences while not excluding history and the social sciences.

But one should really say the symbiotic *vision* of poets like Snyder—a vision which encompasses (and makes more or less equal, if not quite equivalent) not just all human cultures but human and non-human cultures, organic and inorganic life-forms; a vision which indeed bridges the human and non-human, organic and inorganic, just as it also bridges the (discourses or domains of the) secular, theoretical, scientific with (those of) the poetic, metaphysical, religious, sacred. And the environmental writing (as opposed to romantic nature writing) needed to clearly set forth such a vision is (as we see with Snyder) necessarily a hybrid writing (discourse) that combines theoretical/poetic and secular/sacred. Perhaps it is also, in the context of our current intellectual “scene,” still a “minority” discourse. But if so then perhaps this eco-writing may be “minor writing” in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari:¹¹ a writing or discourse which emerges and expands from within the “majority” or “dominant” (e.g. colonial, Eurocentric, “theoretical”) writing or discourse like a “foreign language” within our “standard language,” decentering with its violent force the confident syntactic and logical assumptions of the latter.

NOTES

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¹ In the realm of ethics and metaphysics we might think here of Levinas’ ethics, based not on the being of oneself but on the otherness of being, that is, of the *other’s* being; here Levinas (and following him Derrida) has revised Heidegger’s still-too-egocentric ontology (See e.g., *Totality and Infinity*). Of course, from an ecocritical perspective one might think Levinas’ perspective is still too anthropocentric.

² See Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," in *Critical Theory Since Plato 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: UP of Florida, 1986) 758-65; Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," in *Prose Keys to Modern Poetry*, ed. Karl Shapiro (Nebraska: U of Nebraska, 1962).

³ Indeed he opens this final passage with the phrase: "I do not dare say that John or Jonathan [England or America] will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow . . . (*Walden* 223).

⁴ If we associate Native Americans with "wildness" in the sense of violence and disorder, it is at least partly because they had to survive; they had to overcome the forces not just of starvation and disease, and of internecine strife largely a function of the basic need to survive, but also of the Whites who wanted to take their land, if not also to exterminate them. Being forced into such a marginal situation induces wildness in the sense of cunning and a breaking down of rigid moral dichotomies, for this is what is needed for survival. Thus we have the many Native American myths and folk tales about the coyote as "trickster." In "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," Snyder states that the history of American Indian literature is "a history of humiliation, defeat and dispossession" (*The Old Ways* 83) and that the coyote as a trickster figure defies "a clear dualism of good and evil" (84), proving himself as a man of dignity, a guardian and a protector spirit who clearly represents "benevolence, compassion, help, to human beings" (84). According to Snyder, the coyote is "a perfect expression of a specific set of natural relationships . . . most crucial is] the meeting of Trickster and coyote. Coyote is smart, quick, omnivorous, careful, playful; a good parent; opportunistic, and graceful. . . . [A]nd this learning is *moral* as well as being useful for survival" (87, my emphasis). Coyote is "always traveling along, doing the best he can" (84), even in the face of adversity in "The Call of the Wild." Therefore for Schuler the coyote is also a "wisdom teacher"; he has an "original mind," which resembles the Dharma eye that not only can go beyond rational comprehension (79) and but also see into "the grain of things in the larger picture" (*Regarding Wave* 112). In this case, the coyote's "off-center, unorthodox, challenging, anarchic, trickster-visions of life" also functions as a symbol of "the poet" (Schuler 123).

⁵ The passage continues: "Civilizations east and west have long been on a collision course with wild nature, and now the developed nations in

particular have the witless power to destroy not only individual creatures but whole species, whole processes, of the earth. We need a civilization that can live fully and creatively together with wildness. We must start growing it right here, in the New World.”

⁶ For Serres, the root of “contract” is associated with “the connection, the cord, attached or detached” and “[c]ontract means that some collectivity is working together to *pull*, or draw, something—a plow, a burden” (*Conversations* 88). In another passage, Serres comments that “contract” originally means “the tract or trait or draft that tightens and pulls: a set of cords assures, without language, the subtle system of constraints and freedoms through which each linked element receives information about every other and about the system, and draws security from all” (*The Natural Contract* 103). Revolting against the hierarchical, anthropocentric view of social contract between human and human, Serres’s ecological natural contract, though not a DIY manual designed for fixing environmental problems (Assad 161), awakens and “brings into focus the future relationship between humankind and Earth” (150).

⁷ Serres also emphasizes, in *The Natural Contract*, the exigency of a *global* philosophy—to cope with the forthcoming *global* hazards.

⁸ This insight finds an echo in many contemporary Native American writers, including Simon Ortiz and Leslie Silko (“The Rediscovery” 459).

⁹ Just as Homer, for instance, lets the gods or muses speak through him, and the “cosmos” speaks through Whitman in *Song of Myself*.

¹⁰ For many years, all schoolchildren in America have had to repeat this pledge robotically every morning at the beginning of class, as if it were a prayer in church: “I pledge allegiance to the flag, and to the country for which it stands, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.”

¹¹ In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Deleuze is many respects a “radical empiricist” (or, as he says in his book on Kant, a “transcendental empiricist”), and (partly for this reason) a thinker who combines many different (theoretical and narrative) discourses and modalities. One of his key notions which could easily fit the ecocritical and “symbiotic” perspective is that of (a Nietzschean) pure *becoming* with no clear beginning or end-point (*Dialogues 2*): rather than Platonic/Hegelian binaries (e.g. beginning and end, ideal and copy) we have the becoming of *meanings* and of *pure events*.

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