

Gary Snyder and Taoism

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Gary Snyder is a very important contemporary American poet who has served as a bridge between the East and West since the late fifties and the early sixties. Together with other poets, he has tried to assimilate and transplant Asian philosophy and poetry into contemporary American poetry. Because of his importance in contemporary American poetry, Snyder's assimilation of Asian philosophical and literary influences has attracted much critical attention. But it seems that critics have so far mainly focused their attention on the influence exerted by Zen Buddhism on his thinking and works. They have neglected that Taoism also has contributed significantly to Snyder's poetry and poetics. Moreover, some crucial aspects of Snyder's thinking and poetry bear rather strong resemblance to Taoism, though there might not be any direct influence. The purpose of the present paper is to study this influence and, more importantly, resemblance.

From the outset we should realize that Taoism is a highly sophisticated philosophical and religious school that has various historical ramifications and interacts with other philosophical and religious schools. In order to study Snyder's relation with Taoism proper, I will focus my attention on the Taoist classics, mainly *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu*, in the present paper. I realize the authorships of these two books are questionable. They may be compilations with different pieces by different individuals or the works of one or more authors undergoing intervening editing. However, for convenience' sake I will refer to the author or authors (editor or editors) by the conventional pseudonym: Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu.

Snyder came into contact with Taoism when he was an undergraduate student at Reed College. He made the following statement in an interview:

Within a year or so I went through the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and most of the classics of Chinese and Indian Buddhist literature. The convergence that I found really exciting

was the Mahayana Buddhist wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition. It was that very precise cultural meeting that also coincided with the highest period of Chinese poetry – the early and middle T'ang Dynasty Zen masters and the poets who were their contemporaries and in many cases friends – that was fascinating.

(*Real Work*, 94)

Considering the intimidating bulk of the above-listed canons, it may be argued that Snyder must have been a highly selective reader, if not a superficial browser. His selectiveness can be seen in that, among other things, he reads Taoism in the light of modern ecology. In his important essay "Four Changes" (See *Turtle Island*, 91-102), he eulogizes Taoism as one of the social and religious forces which have worked through history toward an ecologically and culturally enlightened state of affairs.

Starting from the modern ecological point of view, Snyder joins his Taoist predecessors in attacking men's aggressiveness and this anti-aggressive attitude, it seems, is the most significant aspect in Snyder's relation with Taoism. Chuang Tzu describes men's aggressiveness very vividly in the following passage:

In their sleep their spirits compete with each other; in waking hours their bodies jostle. They entangle themselves with everything they encounter. Every day they use their minds in struggle, grandly, slyly, or secretively. They are upset with little fears and overwhelmed with great fears. They hustle and bustle like crossbow pellets in their arbitration of right and wrong.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 2 "Discussion on Making All things Equal," my translation)

其寐也魂交其覺也形開與接爲搆日以心鬪縵者審者密者小恐憚憚大恐
縵縵其發若機括其司是非之謂也

《莊子·齊物論》

Opposed mainly to Confucian ethics which emphasizes human being's moral and social responsibility, Chuang Tzu in the above passage criticizes men's aggressiveness as shown in social activities. In another statement, Chuang Tzu specifically points out that the social concerns cherished by the

Confucianists and Mo-ists only add to the confusion of the society:

Now the victims of death penalty already jostle with each other, the bearers of cangues push each other, and the sufferers of punishments have each other in sight. Still the Confucianists and Mo-ists rush into the midst of the fettered and manacled men, waving their arms. Isn't that too much? Aren't they too brazen and too lacking in any sense of shame? I don't know any sagely wisdom that is not in fact a wedge that fastens the cangue, that any benevolence and righteousness are not in fact the loop and lock of these fetters and manacles. Who can tell that Tseng and Shih are not the whistling reed arrows used by Chieh and Chih? Therefore I say, get rid of sageness and discard knowledge, and the world will be in perfect order.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 11 "Let It Be, Leave It Alone," my translation)

今世殊死者相枕也桁楊者相推也刑戮者相望也而儒墨乃始離跂攘臂乎桎梏之間意甚矣哉其無愧而不知耻也甚矣吾未知聖知之不爲桁楊接摺也仁義之不爲桎梏鑿納也焉知會史之不爲桀跖嚙失也故曰絕聖弃知而天下大治

《莊子·在宥》

The advice given by Chuang Tzu that sageness and knowledge should be discarded also means, besides being a remedy for social ills, that to Chuang Tzu the philosopher, men's aggressiveness is also embodied, epistemologically, in their desire for knowledge. He argues that philosophically it is impossible to satisfy this aggressiveness:

My life has a limit but knowledge has none. It is dangerous to use what is limited to pursue what has no limit. If you have known this and still strive for knowledge, you are in greater danger!

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 3 "The Secret of Caring for Life," my translation)

吾生也有涯而知也無涯以有涯隨無涯殆已而已而爲知者殆而已矣

《莊子·養生主》

While the Chinese Taoists mainly focus their attention on the damage caused by men's aggressiveness on social or, sometimes, philosophical levels,

Snyder views this damage from a much broader perspective:

What we are witnessing in the world today is an unparalleled waterfall of destruction of a diversity of human culture; plant species; animal species; of the richness of the biosphere and the millions of years of organic evolution that have gone into it.

(The Old Ways, 17)

Snyder, influenced by modern ecology, often criticizes the highly industrialized modern society and men's exploitation of the ecological system from an ecological point of view. Sometimes he changes the features of his material to make it fit in with this perspective:

"Man is the heart of the universe
the upshot of the five elements,
born to enjoy food and color and noise. . ."
Get off my back Confucius
There's enough noise now.

(Myths and Texts, 11)

In this passage Snyder first turns Confucius into an epicurean who advocates that men should enjoy themselves at the expense of the rest of the world. Then Snyder pits himself against Confucius, like Chuang Tzu often does in his writings, but he criticizes Confucius from an ecological perspective rather than from the one held by Chuang Tzu.

Though opposed to the idea that man is the heart of the universe, Snyder does not isolate man from other forms of life. Instead, he emphasizes the interdependence between mankind and the ecology system, as he says in the important essay "Four Changes":

Man is but a part of the fabric of life — dependent on the whole fabric for his very existence. As the most highly developed tool-using animal, he must recognize that the unknown evolutionary destinies of other life forms are to be respected, and act as gentle steward of the earth's community of being.

(Turtle Island, 91)

In his thinking human beings are not only generally related to the ecology system. They are, more importantly, related to their specific localities or habitats. Snyder believes that a highly industrialized society with a mobile

population tends to neglect or even harm the ecology system. In order to offset this harmful tendency, he encourages his readers to find out their roots in their specific localities, as described in his poem "Roots":

Draw over and dig
 The loose ash soil
 Hoe handles are short,
 The sun's course long
 Fingers deep in the earth search
 Roots, pull them out; feel through;
 Roots are strong.

(*Regarding Wave*, 25)

The search for roots indicates, among other things, that Snyder, like the Taoists, wants to go back to the state when human beings were not alienated from either the inner or the outer nature or, in other words, human beings' *hsing* 性 was in harmony with *tzu jan* 自然. Some titles of Snyder's books, such as *The Back Country*, *Earth House Hold*, *Turtle Island* and *The Old Ways*, show Snyder's longing for such a healthy past. In Snyder's opinion poetry is a discipline surviving from ancient times and the poet is similar to the shaman functionally in pointing out mankind's connection with nature and with primitive times. He himself is an example:

As poet I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the late Paleolithic: the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe. I try to hold both history and wilderness in mind, that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times.

(*Six Poets of the San Francisco Renaissance*, 52)

In the Taoist classics many chief personae, too, hark back to the ancient society where the size and population remained small and people had no use for tools. Having this ideal innocent society in mind, the Taoists are disappointed with their own times because people exert themselves too much and, as a result, human nature (*jen hsing* 人性) is distorted. Snyder, like his Chinese Taoist predecessors, is also disappointed with the times in which he lives. He also believes that too much exertion on the part of

mankind, as shown in modern industrialized society, is detrimental to both external nature and human nature, though he often emphasizes the damage done to the ecology system. From this disappointment arises his dislike for Western culture:

I don't like Western culture because I think it has much in it that is inherently wrong and that is at the root of the environmental crisis that is not recent, it is very ancient; it has been building up for a millennium. There are many things in Western culture that are admirable. But a culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its own being — from the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self-informing ecosystems) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within — is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior.

(*Turtle Island*, 106)

Hence sometimes we notice a note of nostalgia in Snyder's poetry, as in the Taoist classics. The following passage is such an example:

Pine sleeps, cedar splits straight
 Flowers crack the pavement.
 Pa-ta Shan-jen
 (A painter who watched Ming fall)
 lived in a tree:
 "The brush
 May paint the mountains and streams
 Though the territory is lost."

(*Myths and Texts*, 15)

Though Snyder changes Pa-ta Shan-jen from a member of the Ming royal family lamenting over the downfall of the Ming dynasty and the loss of political power, as he was historically, to a modern artist lamenting over the damage done to the ecology system and trying to recreate the original healthy state of the ecology system with the help of his art, the note of nostalgia still remains in this passage. To some extent, the portrayal of Pa-ta Shan-jen can be treated as Snyder's self-portrait.

However, both the Taoists and Snyder realize it is ultimately impossible to return to the primitive times. The best thing human beings, as the most advanced tool-using animals, can do today is to do nothing harmful to other

species, animate or inanimate, and, by doing so, to keep the world as intact as possible. This means human beings should show respect to other species and stay away from forcing them to serve human needs. In *Chuang Tzu* this message is conveyed through the mouth of Jo of the North Sea when he is asked for the meanings of the Heavenly and the human:

Jo of the North Sea said, "Horses and oxen have four feet — this is the Heavenly. Putting a halter on the horse's head, piercing the ox's nose — this is the human. Therefore it is said: do not let the human wipe out the Heavenly; do not let the purposeful wipe out the fated; do not sacrifice your reputation for the sake of achievement. Hold on to this and do not lose it — this means returning to the True.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 17 "Autumn Floods," my translation)

北海若曰牛馬四足是謂天落馬首穿牛鼻是謂人故曰無以人滅天無以故滅命無以得殉名謹守而勿失是謂反其真

《莊子·秋水》

In order to accomplish this goal, the first step is to get rid of human desire, as taught by Chuang Tzu:

It is said that those ancient rulers who shepherded the world were without desire and the world was satisfied, they did not act and the ten thousand things were transformed, they were deep and silent and the hundred clans were at rest.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 12 "Heaven and Earth," my translation)

故曰古之畜天下者無欲而天下足無爲而萬物化淵靜而百姓定

《莊子·天地》

On the other hand, staying away from imposing human needs means to let all things, including human beings, develop their own nature by themselves. As a result, everything will be liberated and realize its potentiality to the fullest degree. In Snyder's words, this represents a state in which

Things

Swimming on their own & finally freed
from human need.

*(Six Sections from Mountains
and Rivers Without End, 7)*

However, this is not a state of anarchy. On the contrary, it is an organic cosmos formed with the help of mutual respect. Only when this state is reached can one say that nature is kept intact. To Snyder, who believes in the interrelation between external wilderness and internal wilderness, to respect nature also means to stop suppressing the dark side of human psyche. Instead of looking to a model or rule imposed from outside man should trust and follow his natural being. Only by following man's own grain can man be truly moral. Snyder's criticism of Western culture partly stems from this conviction:

There is something in Western culture that wants to totally wipe out creepy-crawlies, and feels repugnance for toadstools and snakes. This is fear of one's own deepest natural inner-self wilderness areas, and the answer is, relax. Relax around bugs, snakes, and your own hairy dreams.

(Turtle Island. 96)

Underneath this general and somewhat vague statement advocating the preservation of external wilderness and of one's hairy dreams we can discern a call for humility on the part of human beings. This emphasis on humility is a significant aspect of Taoism that influences Snyder, who calls this aspect the feminine aspect. In Chuang Tzu's works this lesson of humility is taught through the mouth of Lao Tzu:

Lao Tan said, "The enlightened king rules the world and blankets the world with his achievements without protruding himself. He transforms the ten thousand things but the people do not depend on him. Without promoting or praising anything, he lets everything enjoy itself. He stands on the unfathomable and wanders where there is nothing at all"

*(Chuang Tzu, Ch. 7 "Fit for Emperors
and Kings," my translation)*

老聃曰明王之治功蓋天下而似不自己化貸萬物而民弗持有莫舉名使物自喜立乎不測而游於無有者也

《莊子·應帝王》

Snyder repeats the lesson he has learned from his Taoist teachers when he observes, in the coda of an important essay, that "Knowing that nothing need be done, is where we begin to move from." (*Turtle Island*, 102) In *Regarding Wave* he further elaborates on this concept with poems. "Willow" is one of the poems:

Willow

the pussy
on the pussy-willow
unfolds into fuzz on the leaf.
blonde glow on a cheek;
willow pussy hair.

(*Regarding Wave*, 82)

Similar poems contained in the same book include: "Sand," "Running Water Music," "Beating Wings," "All the Spirit Powers Went to Their Dancing Place," "Long Hair," "Pleasure Boats" and "The Good Earth."

However, to Snyder, who is also influenced by Zen Buddhism, humility only means the first step. The second step, a more active and more important step, is epitomized by the first of the Four Vows of Zen — "Sentient beings are countless. I vow to save them all." Snyder expresses a similar idea that we should take care of all living beings in the world and treat them as our brothers and sisters, as he advocates in "Four Changes":

I am a child of all life, and all living beings are brothers and sisters, my children and grandchildren. And there is a child within me waiting to be brought to birth, the baby of a new and wiser self. Love, Love-making, a man and woman together, seen as the vehicle of mutual realization, where the creation of new selves and a new world of being is as important as reproducing our kind.

(*Turtle Island*, 93)

Both the Taoists and Snyder try to convince their fellow human beings that if human beings stay away from exploiting flora and fauna for material gains, mankind will be benefited in the long run though people might have to forego some material comfort in the short run:

The sage lives with things without harming them, and he who

does not harm things cannot in turn be harmed by them. Only he who does not harm anything can go after or welcome other people harmoniously.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 22 "Knowledge Wandered North," my translation)

聖人處物不傷物不傷物者物亦不能傷也唯無所傷者爲能與人相將迎
《莊子·知北游》

The same idea can be found in Snyder's "Coyote Man, Mr. President, & the Gunfighters" (See *Left Out in the Rain*, 206-209), a free adaptation of Chuang Tzu's "Discourse on Sword" (See 《莊子·說劍第三十》). In this essay, the ideal pistol that the coyote man thinks the president should use in his administration of the country, like the sword recommended to the king by Chuang Tzu, is formed by mountains and rivers. Only by using this kind of weapon, or by taking the ecology system into consideration in other words, can human beings themselves live a peaceful life.

Besides the similarities between the Taoist world view and Snyder's world view, we can also discern some similarities between Taoism and Snyder in the latter's choice of subject matter and some other technical aspects of his poetry.

The first thing we notice when reading Snyder's poetry is the emphasis he puts on nature. Much of his poetry can be termed nature poetry. This, it seems, is to some extent influenced by Taoism. According to Snyder himself, he first responded, when he lived in Oregon in 1949, to his contact with Chinese poetry on the level of nature and that was what he was interested in. (See "Chinese Poetry and the American Imagination," *Ironwood*, 1 (1981): 13) As Professor Wai-lim Yip points out in his essay "Aesthetic Consciousness of Landscape in Chinese and Anglo-American Poetry," historically Taoism paved the way for the rise of Chinese nature poetry. So we may say that, in that sense, Snyder's interest in nature is partly molded by Taoism.

As far as the choice of subject matter is concerned, the emphasis on nature is only one salient feature of Snyder's poetry which shows Taoist influence. In fact perhaps we should not use the word "emphasis" because, according to Taoist view, all things in the world contain the Way and, hence, they are on the same level. Moreover, things always exist in a state of flux. These two points are made clear by Chuang Tzu in the following statements:

The ten thousand things are really one. People regard things they like as rare and unearthly; they regard things they don't like as foul and rotten. But the foul and rotten may turn into the rare and unearthly, and the rare and unearthly may turn into the foul and rotten. So it is said that the whole world is unified through one breath. Therefore the sage values oneness.
(Chuang Tzu, Ch. 22 "Knowledge Wandered North," my translation)

故萬物一也是其所美者爲神奇其所惡者爲臭腐臭腐復化爲神奇神奇復化爲臭腐故曰通天下一氣耳聖人故貴一

《莊子·知北游》

Considering these factors, the poet should not stick to any fixed value system and should not prefer certain topics to others. However, it should be pointed out here that to treat everything equally represents nonetheless a value system, though this might not be a hierarchical value system. Freed from hierarchical value systems, Snyder treats a wide range of subject matter, some of which might be considered trivial or unpoetic by other poets. "The Way Is Not a Way" is one of his numerous poems that contain such unpoetic elements:

The Way Is Not a Way

scattered leaves
 sheets of running
 water.
 unbound hair. loose
 planks on shed roofs.
 stumbling down wood stairs
 shirts undone.
 children pissing in the roadside grass

(Regarding Wave, 51)

Compare this poem with Chuang Tzu's statement quoted above, we may say that this poem convey the same message through concrete, common imagery. The use of imagery accessible to everyone, as shown in the above poem, is in fact closely interrelated with Snyder's opinion that poetry, instead of being something mysterious, is part of his life and everything that happens in his daily life, no matter how insignificant it might appear, can be included into his poetry:

I've had no problem at all. Whatever work I've done, whatever job I've had, has fed right into my poetry, and it's all in there.
(*On Bread and Poetry*, 9)

In the title poem of *Axe Handles* we encounter the following passage:

It's in Lu Ji's *Wen Fu*, fourth century
A.D. "Essay on Literature" – in the
Preface: "In making the handle
Of an axe
By cutting wood with an axe
The model is indeed near at hand."
(*Axe Handle*, 6)

We may assume, as a student of Professor Shih-hsiang Chen who translated *Wen Fu*, Snyder knows the above statement is a metaphor for following models in literary creation. Keeping this in mind, we cannot help asking a question: what kind of model is Snyder trying to follow in this book? As we read the book we realize that instead of following literary models Snyder finds models for his poetry in his daily life, as shown in "All in the Family":

All in the Family
For the first time in memory
heavy rain in August
 turning up the chainsaw
 begin to cut oak
Boletus by the dozen
 fruiting in the woods
Full moon, warm nights
 the boys learn to float
Masa gone off dancing
 for another thirty days
 a Flicker's single call

Oregano, lavender, the *salvia* sage
 wild pennyroyal
 from the Yuba River bank
All in the family
 of Mint.

(*Axe Handles*, 23)

Even a quick glance of the titles of the poems contained in this book can tell us that Snyder tries to treat his daily life as the model for his poetry. These titles include: "Changing Diapers," "Painting the North San Juan School," "Fence Posts," "Soy Sauce," "Walked Two Days in Snow" and "Removing the Plate of the Pump."

Besides choosing things generally considered homely as his subject matter, Snyder also adopts an anti-intellectual attitude in his poetry. He explicitly attributes this attitude to Taoist influence:

Lao-tzu says
 To forget what you knew is best.
 That's what I want:
 To get these sights down,
 Clear, right to the place
 Where they fade
 Back into the mind of my times.
 ("High Quality Information,"
Left Out in the Rain, 130)

In Taoist view as soon as one makes the effort to know something one starts to depart from the essence of the thing in question:

If you try to know anything, you have already departed from it. Do not ask its name, do not try to observe its situation. As a result, things will live of themselves.

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 11 "Let It Be,
 Leave It Alone," my translation)

若彼知之乃是離之無問其名無關其情物固自生

《莊子·在宥》

Adopting Taoist point of view, one may interpret the intellectualization about nature as imposition of human value system upon nature, a form of arrogance on the part of mankind. Keeping Snyder's advocacy of humility in mind, we understand why he makes the following complaint about other poets' works:

The thing that keeps someone else's poem from working for me most often is too much ego interference, too much abstract intellect, too much striving for effect; there is a lack of contact

with the inner voices.

(*The Real Work*, 4-5)

Instead of intellectualizing, the poet should adopt a detached stance in his poetry, as recommended by Lao Tzu in the following statements:

I try to attain the utmost emptiness;
I adhere to stillness.
Ten thousand things flourish together
I watch their return.

(*Tao Te Ching*, Ch.
16, my translation)

致虛極守靜篤萬物並作吾以觀復

《道德經·十六章》

Similarly, Snyder often simply points to various objects in his poetry without making any further comment. However, it should be pointed out that refraining from expressing personal opinions represents nonetheless an intellectual stance or a subtle celebration of self. As a result, with the method of detachment Snyder tries to remove his ego from the poem and, at the same time, to merge himself subtly into the scene and nature. Thus the result sometimes is a sophisticated picture in which man is interrelated with nature, as could be clearly seen in a poem entitled "Piute Creek":

One granite ridge
A tree, would be enough
Or even a rock, a small creek,
A bark shred in a pool.
Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted
Tough trees crammed
In thin stone fractures
A huge moon on it all, is too much.

.....
A clear, attentive mind
Has no meaning but that
Which sees is truly seen.

(*Riprap*, 6)

This method of detached observation or visualization is also the chief

technique he uses in his translation, especially in the Cold Mountain Poems, which have been studied by several critics.

In the above-quoted examples, as in most of his other poems, we find that stylistically simple diction and colloquial tone are used in Snyder's poetry. This is a feature that bears resemblance to one of the important Taoist tenets related to art and literature, the advocacy of simplicity, as expressed by Chuang Tzu:

Wipe out decorations and patterns, scatter the five colors, glue up the eyes of Li Chu, and for the first time the people of the world will open their eyes. Destroy and discard curve and plumb line, get rid of the compass and square, shackle the fingers of Artisan Ch'ui (a skilled artisan of ancient times), and for the first time the people of the world will possess their skills. Therefore it is said, "Great skill appears like clumsiness."

(*Chuang Tzu*, Ch. 10 "Rifling Trunks," my translation)

滅文章散五采膠離朱之目而天下始人含其明矣毀絕鈎繩而弃規矩擲工
倕之指而天下始人有其巧矣故曰大巧若拙

《莊子·法篋》

Snyder's poetry may be regarded as the realization of this aesthetic argument. This can be also seen, besides his simple diction and colloquial tone, in his avoidance of abstraction, intricate allusion and other types of artificiality and his emphasis on concrete imagery, as shown in the previous examples.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the technical resemblances between Snyder's poetry and some of Taoist tenets are closely related to the similarities between Snyder's world view and Taoist world view. In the final analysis, the techniques and contents of literature are inseparably interrelated and neither can be studied in isolation without damage to the other. So instead of treating Snyder's poetry as a self-created world of symbols, we should study his poetry in conjunction with his thinking and his life. This should also be done in the study of Snyder's relation with Taoism.

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