

From Lookout to Ashram: The Way of Gary Snyder

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PART TWO (conclusion)

Riprap (1959), Snyder's first book of poems, already fulfills some of these ends. The title declares a humble yet exacting art in the service of the things of experience; it names a back country book that will be the foundation for others. The initial poem, "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," establishes the elevation he seeks, the "clear, attentive mind," spoken of in "Piute Creek," that "Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen." Except for "T-2 Tanker Blues," none of the poems is Beat, and this is Beat only by virtue of loosening an otherwise tight form and adopting an explicitly oral instead of an inner, meditatively spoken mode. Robert Sward's impression of the poems as "restrained and relatively formal," quiet and "apart" in tone, is just—these poems possess much stillness. All of them are autobiographical or confessional in the Whitmanian sense defined by Robert Bly: they embody "the pervading presence of the poet who simultaneously shares in the processes of life and reveals some of its meaning through his actions." They are arranged chronologically, and so follow the development recorded in the journals, and, like the journals, only with more concentration, they treat the first excursions into the back country and the attempt to truly inhabit it.

Nothing antedating the lookout period is included; only later will the poet remember the immediate past which these poems, especially the first, put behind him. There must have been earlier poems worthy of inclusion, for the poet of these poems is well-practiced in his art. But none is included because *Riprap*, like the journals, represents a decisive beginning. He is into the back country: beyond abstraction into sensation, as in "Water" and "Thin Ice"; beyond the timebound present into timeless primordial reaches of time, as in "Milton by Firelight" and "Above Pate Valley"; beyond Western romance into the mysteries of the Goddess, as in "Praise for Sick Women" and "For a Far-Out Friend." Beyond society, his poems are of the wilderness, the sea, the old countries. Beyond self, they need no reticence.

Some of the poems already mentioned are notable, especially "For a Far-Out Friend" and "Piute Creek," even though the former is marred by a weak ending and the latter by the phrase, "bubble of the heart." The central poem, and one of the best, along with the opening and closing poems, is "Nooksack Valley." Placed mid-way, it represents a turning-point toward the world of "A Stone Garden," a longer poem that may be said to answer it.

it remains in abstract terms. But the very land that calls up “damned memories” is the back country he loves (“Caught more on this land”), and knowing it, as he now knows it here, is what has awakened him and made him reject (again) the lures of civilization. What keeps the “Schools, girls, deals” from getting in and destroying the poem is the powerful objectivity of his present situation, the particular realizations he has of it, the smell of cedar at the end, pervasive, penetrant, that revives his earliest memory of home, of the child’s unspoiled and sustaining world in which he began and to which, however far away he goes, he can in memory again return. The poem expresses his profoundest attachment to *this* back country even as he prepares to leave it for another.

The country to which he goes is Japan, “a great stone garden in the sea.” And in the poem of that name, a stone garden of his own composed of four large blocks of poetry, he treats his discovery there of love, family, and home. Judged by the few poems on Japan, this is the wonderful reward of his experience. “Toji” tells of unusual acceptance (“Nobody bothers you in Toji”) and “Kyoto: March” of the lovers beneath the roofs of frosty houses, who

part, from tangle warm
Of gentle bodies under quilt
And crack the icy water to the face
And wake and feed the children
And grandchildren that they love.

Love of this kind, tendered in this way, is at the heart of “A Stone Garden.”

In the first stanza the poet has a waking dream of the immemorially gardened land, a dream of past-in-present, while on a train carrying him from the countryside to the city—to Tokyo, where, “like a bear,” he tracks “the human future / Of intelligence and despair.” His awareness of culture, of form, of a mastered ecology achieved by centuries of care, contrasts with the urban jungle inhabited by “A horde of excess poets and unwed girls. . . .” Yet in the city, where he “walked a hundred nights” (this stanza begins with the recollection of “a girl I thought I knew,” perhaps the “Robin” of later poems, and, like the first which bespeaks restlessness, bespeaks loneliness) he observes

The thousand postures of all human fond
Touches and gestures, glidings, nude,
The oldest and nakedest women more the sweet,
And saw there first old withered breasts
Without an inward wail of sorrow and dismay
Because impermanence and destructiveness of time
In truth means only, lovely women age—
But with the noble glance of I AM LOVED
From children and from crones, time is destroyed.

Such love conquers time—his own rare insight into the beauty of old women convinces us of this. But it does this also because it venerates the fertile mystery

upon which, in the poet's view, this culture is built and sustained through all vicissitudes, the mystery he associates with the "glittering smelly ricefields," the permanence of nature. His own invocation to this power—"O Muse, a goddess gone astray"—follows in the third stanza, where, in telling of the difficulties of *the* poem he would write ("one time true"), he confesses failure:

The long-lost hawk of Yakamochi and Thoreau
Flits over yonder hill, the hand is bare,
The noise of living families fills the air.

Yet finally he writes that poem in the fourth stanza, which, like the others, follows from something he meditates on—"What became of the child we never had—":

Delight binds man to birth, to death,
—Let's gather in the home—for soon we part—
(The daughter is in school, the son's at work)
& silver fish-scales coat the hand, the board;
The charcoal glowing underneath the eaves,
Squatting and fanning til the rice is steamed,
All our friends and children come to eat.
This marriage never dies. Delight
Crushes it down and builds it all again
With flesh and wood and stone,
The woman there—she is not old or young.

The urge to transcend "the noise of living families," to grasp the hawk or turtle-dove of poetry, is what this poem subdues. Sometimes flawed in syntax, cadence, and rhyme, the poem is nevertheless of importance in Snyder's development: he would relinquish even the self-love of poetic ambition and willingly serve the Muse that so deeply inspires him and makes love, fulfilled in community and culture, a way of enlightenment.

Although it was published after *Riprap, Myths & Texts* (1960) was written concurrently, during the years 1952-1956. It is Snyder's most ambitious book, a work of 48 untitled poems in three closely related parts comprising a single design and developing the theme of destruction-creation-renewal. Only a few of the poems are made as well as the best poems of *Riprap*; they are generally looser, their Poundian form more obvious. But taken together, as one continuous poem, they are an impressive achievement. Their title, *Myths & Texts*—probably taken from such early ethnological reports as John R. Swanton's "Haida Texts and Myths" and "Tlingit Myths and Texts"—describes the kind of lore to which Snyder, sometimes himself a shaman, assimilates his poetry. In the first shaman song he speaks of his work:

I sit without thoughts by the log-road
Hatching a new myth

Cut down to make room for the suburbs

in the second, as sardonic comment:

Men who hire men to cut groves
Kill snakes, build cities, pave fields,
Believe in God, but can't
Believe their own senses.
Let alone Gautama. Let them lie.

And since he has learned that the Marxian promise of permanent reform is a fairy tale ("O Karl would it were true / I'd put my saw to work for you / & the wicked social tree would fall right down"), he relies on the vast processes of destruction-creation spoken of in Hindu mythology. He is willing to wait out the Kalpa:

Until the next blaze
Of the world, the universe,
Millions of worlds, burning

The second section, "Hunting," moves further back in time than the first. Hunting is an earlier wilderness occupation than logging and requires different skills and attitudes. By hunting we truly enter the wild and the world of animals. Snyder describes its virtue in "Poetry and the Primitive," in a section entitled "Making Love with Animals":

To hunt means to use your body and senses to the fullest: to strain your consciousness to feel what the deer are thinking today, this moment; to sit still and let yourself go into the birds and wind while waiting by a game trail. Hunting magic is designed to bring the game to you—the creature who has heard your song, witnessed your sincerity, and out of compassion comes within your range. Hunting magic is not only aimed at bringing beasts to their death, but to assist in their birth—to promote their fertility.

Hunting is a disciplined, reverential art, a ritual in a culture that knows its environment intimately. So here, as in collections of American Indian lore, are prayers for birds, bear, deer; poems listing the foods "we lived on then" and telling how to make a horn spoon. These poems belong to the shamanist world of Raven and Coyote, in which, as in the poem on the bear mating with a woman, little distinction is made between animals and people.*

*In a brief notice of *Myths & Texts* in the *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXIV (April-June, 1961), 184, the use of the oral literature of the American Indians, their motifs, songs, text translation, a Kwakiutl phrase, Coyote, etc., is pointed out—and also the fact of Snyder's competence in this area and his intention of dedicating the poems

“falling or burning”—that destruction, the burning, is the condition of creation and transformation; that, in a forest fire, “The hot seeds steam underground / still alive.”

This image (in #15) brings forward again the theme of renewal introduced in section one. There Snyder tells of the lodgepole pine whose seed escapes destructive fire and thereby brings new birth. In the last poem of that section the

Lodgepole
cone / seed waits for fire

and we are enjoined to “wait / Until the next blaze. . . .” This is the blaze, the forest fire up Thunder Creek with whose cessation and the glimmer of the morning star and the new dawn the book apocalyptically ends.

Snyder’s next volume of poetry, *A Range of Poems*, is his largest book to date. Published in London in 1966, it is, as the stamping on the spine indicates, a “Collected Poems”—here, in the following order, one finds *Riprap*, *Cold Mountain*, *Myths & Texts*, *Miyazawa Kenji*, and *The Back Country*. The translations in this volume are a notable part of his work and function in much the same way as the translation, “Record of the Life of the Ch’an Master Po-chang Huai-Hai,” in *Earth House Hold*. The life of Master Po-chang is an example of Zen hagiography and, after “Tanker Notes,” re-establishes the strict Zen discipline of “Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji” and serves as a foundation for the remaining essays. *Cold Mountain*, as we have seen, provides a model of Zen life and attainment—as Snyder says of Han-shan and his friend Shih-te, the original Dharma bums, “they became Immortals and you sometimes run on to them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America.” It also provides a model of Chinese poetry just as the selection of poems from the work of Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933) provides a model of recent Japanese poetry. These translations show us what Snyder has tried to assimilate and are as important in his work and in gauging his achievement as Lowell’s translations in *Imitations* are to his. The selections from Miyazawa Kenji are in free verse and treat states of landscape-and-being, the Buddhist awareness of man in nature. They set a very high standard—only a few of Snyder’s poems attain the excellence of Miyazawa Kenji’s “Spring and the Ashura” and “Pine Needles.” In *A Range of Poems*, they preface *The Back Country*; in the recent altered and enlarged edition of *The Back Country* (1968), they are placed at the end.

The development represented by *The Back Country* is not one of kind so much as scope. The essential ground of the earlier poems is covered again only now there are some modifications in form, focus, tone, and theme. The design of “A Berry Feast,” for example, is more complex, as perhaps it should be in a single poem resuming so many of the poet’s previous themes. Williams’ triadic variable foot is now employed, as in “A Heifer Clambers Up,” and the use of space punctuation within the line is more frequent. There is even a calligramme—“Once Only.” None of this is as significant as the poet’s attempt to find a formal structure of sufficient openness for the full range of his work. The title itself serves this end of unity, and in the recent edition of the book, Snyder spelled it

out by replacing the numerals of the previous edition with Far West, Far East (Japan), Kali (India), and Back (spelled BACK). This names the progress of his travels but also, in conjunction with an epigraph from Bashō, indicates the way of life exemplified by the poems. The epigraph announces the desire to wander, which requires an open form: “. . . So—when was it—I, drawn like blown cloud, couldn’t stop dreaming of roaming, roving the coast up and down. . . .” This is a free rendering and expresses a more youthful and carefree spirit than one finds in *A Journey to the Deep North* or in *The Back Country* itself. An adventurous spirit belongs more fittingly to a series of haiku published here under the punning title, “Hitch Haiku,” and to what promises to be the poet’s longest work, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (six sections were published in 1956). The conception of this endless poem comes from scroll painting; in *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy Ryder describes it: “I’ll do a new long poem called ‘Rivers and Mountains Without End’ and just write it on and on on a scroll and unfold on and on with new surprises and always what went before forgotten, see, like a river. . . . I’ll spend three thousand years writing it, it’ll be packed full of information on soil conservation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, astronomy, geology, Hsuan Tsung’s travels, Chinese painting theory, reforestation, Oceanic ecology and food chains.” The poems already published are often more “experimental” in form and more vernacular than the poems published elsewhere—and more uneven in quality. They are Snyder’s version of an *open road* and their formal freedom and capaciousness sometimes reminds one of Pound’s *Cantos*. There is yet no assurance that their unity may be of the kind declared in the following verse cited by Blyth (*Haiku*, I):

Mountains and rivers, the whole earth,—
All manifest forth the essence of being.

Even though they are not placed in chronological order—perhaps because of it—they have the freshness of unfolding experiences. But they do not present experience as we now begin to find it in *The Back Country*, where the formal structure involves return, a turning back.

The unity of *Riprap* is essentially one of stillness, and that of *Myths & Texts* is thematic. The unity of *The Back Country* depends upon the notion of travel and the metaphoric force of the title, but neither secures it so much as the presence of memory which now begins to fill some of the poems. This is a third volume of poems, and so its ground is familiar to poet and reader and, in a sense, recovered. Now experience is compounded by remembering and deepening of life. Though the book, especially the opening section, “Far West,” contains poems that might have been included in *Riprap*, its dominant tone is of another kind. There is agitation in *Riprap*, but it is resolved by a course of action, the journey to Japan. Now, much that the poet has carried with him on his travels is admitted, as in “Looking at Pictures to be Put Away”:

Who was this girl
In her white night gown
Clutching a pair of jeans

On a foggy redwood deck.
She looks up at me tender,
Calm, surprised,

What will we remember
Bodies thick with food and lovers
After twenty years.

And as he continues to travel, still by working aboard ship, he begins to ponder in "7.IV.64," and not with the levity the poem intends, his place in life:

all my friends have children
& I'm getting old. at least enough to be
a First Mate or an Engineer.
now I know I'll never be a Ph.D.

What is now admitted in the poems, and we realize was hitherto almost wholly excluded, is the poet's experience of love. The more he travels the more he is possessed by thoughts of love and friendship, and by a sense of loss, by the memory of innocent desire with which he first knew them. Back, mirror-imaged, may be a reflection of this.

Friendship is a minor strain, best represented in "August on Sourdough, A Visit from Dick Brewer" and "Rolling In at Twilight." The gesture of the poem itself, which names the friend and fixes forever an exemplary act, testifies to Snyder's feelings for the deep and open relationship of youth. In the first poem Dick Brewer "hitched a thousand miles" to see the poet, who, in turn, loaned him his poncho; in the second, Phil Whalen has laid in some groceries against the poet's probable arrival.

Love is the major strain and is first presented here in "After Work":

The shack and a few trees
float in the blowing fog

I pull out your blouse,
warm my cold hands
 on your breasts.
you laugh and shudder
peeling garlic by the
 hot iron stove.
bring in the axe, the rake,
the wood

we'll lean on the wall
against each other
stew simmering on the fire
as it grows dark
 drinking wine.

Love here is a prized part of a steady continuum of living whose sensations the poet fully savors and deeply appreciates. It is depicted as a homecoming. And it is as simple and directly physical and without haste as the poem, for the poet who transfers the rhythm of his experience to the poem knows the values of relation and contrast, the care of the husbandman, and is as confident of the pleasures of love as of other goods of life, the food to come, the wine, the enveloping warmth and darkness.

This poem is among the new poems in the latest edition of *The Back Country*. Along with the concluding poem of section one, "For the Boy Who Was Dodger Point Lookout Fifteen Years Ago," it introduces the theme of loss and longing that before was not broached until the poems for Robin in section two. This concluding poem is explicitly retrospective. A head note tells us that the poet, now hiking alone in the Olympic mountains, remembers a trip in the same area many years before with his first wife (an experience treated in another poem, "Alysoun," which begins section three). The poem is for the boy-lookout and for the boy the poet had been. It describes the mountain meadows and, from the vantage of the lookout, to which the poet has climbed to talk with the lonely boy, the tableau of Alison (Robin) bathing naked in a pond. From this distance she is "Swan Maiden," merely a lovely icon as well as significant myth-motif. For what is important is the meeting of poet and lookout "in our / world of snow and flowers"—the representation of friendship as perhaps higher and purer than love. The concluding stanza, not without Hemingwayesque sentimentality, contrasts the pristine relations of love and friendship with the present desperate confusion of the poet:

I don't know where she is now;
I never asked your name.
In this burning, muddy, lying,
blood-drenched world
that quiet meeting in the mountains
cool and gentle as the muzzles of
three elk, helps keep me sane.

In section two, "Four Poems for Robin" carry this theme. They tell of the lonely poet who remembers in his body ("I remember your cool body / Naked under a summer cotton dress") and now knows that in the "pointless wars of the heart" he lost the "grave, awed intensity" of young love:

. . . what the others
All crave and seek for;
We left it behind at nineteen.

"December at Yase" tells of the wars of the will ("I was obsessed with a plan"; "I thought I must make it alone. I / Have done that")* but also acknowledges that

*Snyder was married to Alison Gass from 1950 to 1952. *Riprap* begins almost immediately afterward.

and ends with the prayerful awareness of the still flowing wave in all things:

The Voice
is a wife
to

him still.*

And the book is especially well unified by its occasion, the fullness of the new life, a primitive, "archaic" life, he has found with Masa Uehara at the ashram on Suwa-no-Se Island, their marriage there (with which account the superb last essay of *Earth House Hold* ends), and the birth of their child out of the sea of the womb. In "It Was When," a catalog (or Whitmanian litany) of sexual consummations, he tells how "we caught"—and

Waves
and the
prevalent easterly
breeze
whispering into you
through us,
the grace.

In "The Bed in the Sky," he turns from the cold outdoors, where he feels he ought to stay to watch the moon, to the indoor warmth of bed and wife and the stirring child in her belly. "Kai, Today" announces the sea-birth of his son, and "Not Leaving the House," tells of the change this advent has brought:

From dawn til late at night
making a new world of ourselves
around this life.

This is not a book of travel nor of place, though the third section is largely devoted to the "burning island." Place is important but finally indifferent. What matters in this account of working in the elements of sea and land, of planting seeds and caring for new life, is that the current of the universal being has flowed through him and he has become, more selflessly, a servant of life. And something hitherto unattained has at last been attained: the wish of the lookout who long ago noted in his first journal, "Or having a wife and child, living close to the ocean, with skills for gathering food." This book commemorates the taking up housekeeping on earth.

*Snyder uses as space divider in this poem and "Rainbow Body," the *Vajra* device () also used in "Dharma Queries." It is, he says, "an ancient wisdom/thunderbolt symbol."

From lookout to ashram. From Walden, we might say, to Fruitlands. The imperative throughout is Thoreau's: "Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour." But the direction is Alcott's: from solitude to society, from the individual to the family. Meditation is a seeing into the self that entails its acting out, and this action, Snyder says, in "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," is "ultimately toward the true community (sangha) of 'all beings.'" The revolution—or transformation—he calls for is to be made in family life, for its agency is love and "love begins with the family and its network of erotic and responsible relationships." To change the form of family life is to alter society radically, at its root. And Snyder's Edenic vision of "ecological balance, classless society, social and economic freedom" is as radical for our society as the matrilineal communal family that he believes enables it—the "family as part of the divine ecology."

The feelings to which this familial-social vision answers are neither unfamiliar nor radical. Literature, and the literature of youth, has always reported them. Snyder, whose writing tells nothing of his past family life, tells in "Passage to More Than India" of his own discovery, at 18, in a community house, of "harmony and community with fellow beings." This too, much later, is what he found ideally at the Banyan Ashram on Suwa-no-Se Island. Such feelings, like so much that is considered radical, are conservative—conserving essential and full humanity—and Snyder is right to connect them with occult traditions and a persistent Great Subculture. What is radical now is not merely the repudiation of present social forms ("the modern family is the smallest and most barren that has ever existed"; "the traditional cultures are in any case doomed") but the search for social solutions in the past, the distance back being, perhaps, the measure of this. Snyder is radical because he holds, as he says, "the most archaic values on earth" and because he tries to advance them by realizing them anew in his life and his work. Yet there is nothing archaic in his appropriation of them: they are his (and ours) by right of modern psychology and anthropology as well as meditation. No more than Thoreau, can he be put down as a primitive: "I try to hold both history and wilderness in my mind," he says, "that my poems may approach the true measure of things and stand against the unbalance and ignorance of our times."

This declaration addresses our fearful centralizing technology and the sovereignty of the present that speeds it on; and it is noteworthy because it announces again, for still another generation, the great theme and major work of our time, the restoration of culture in its true measure. Like Lawrence and Williams before him, to cite only two of the pioneer modern writers with whom he stands, Snyder would redress our culture by restoring the vital and the feminine, by voyaging historically and psychically to Pagany, and by charting for us new contours of feeling.

We should not expect him by himself to work this great change. This is the mistake of those who confuse poetry with politics, critics like Peter Levi, who says that we need Snyder's poetry but adds that "his medicine is not going to cure anything. . . ." His work is political because it bears witness; on this account one respects the ways it combines autobiography and utopia. We should accept his optimism—can an ecological conscience be created in time to save a devastated

