True Night Study Guide

True Night by Gary Snyder

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Introduction

"True Night" by Gary Snyder was first published in 1983 in Snyder's collection of poems, *Axe Handles*. The poem tells a story of how the sleeping poet is awakened by the sound of raccoons in his kitchen. He gets out of bed and angrily chases the raccoons away. Then, in the stillness of the night outside the house, he becomes more reflective, to the point where he seems to become one with nature. After a while, he reminds himself that he should not get carried away by such introspective meditations. He needs his sleep and has responsibilities to his family. So, he returns to bed to sleep and await the dawning of a new day.

"True Night" is often considered the finest poem in *Axe Handles*, which was the first volume of poetry Snyder published for nine years following his Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Turtle Island* in 1974. The poem illustrates some of Snyder's typical concerns: his appreciation of the natural world and his interest in Zen Buddhism and altered states of mind. The poem can be read metaphorically as a journey in consciousness from the dualities of the outer world to a state of oneness, followed by a return to the world of duality with an increased appreciation of its possibilities.

Author Biography

Gary Snyder was born on May 8, 1930, in San Francisco, California, the first of two children born to Harold and Lois Snyder. His family moved to Washington and then to Oregon, and Snyder attended high school in Portland, Oregon. After graduation, he enrolled at Reed College, Portland, graduating in 1951 with a bachelor of arts degree in anthropology and literature. Snyder then entered a graduate program at Indiana University but left the following year and returned to San Francisco. In 1953, he entered the University of California, Berkeley, pursuing graduate study in Oriental languages. During this period, he also worked as a lumberjack, trail maker, and forest firewatcher. He also became part of a community of West Coast writers which included Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who became the leaders of the Beat Generation in the 1950s.

In 1956, Snyder traveled to Japan to study Zen Buddhism and Japanese language. He remained abroad for most of the next twelve years, studying Zen and traveling to places such as India and Indonesia. It was during these years that his first two poetry collections, *Riprap* (1959) and *Myths & Texts* (1960), were published.

During the second part of the 1960s, when Snyder divided his time between the United States and Japan, he produced a steady stream of publications. These included *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* in 1965 (the Cold Mountain poems are Snyder's translations of poems by Han-Shan); *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End* (1965); *A Range of Poems*, which included translations of the modern Japanese poet, Miyazawa Kenji (1966); *The Back Country* (1968); and *Regarding Wave* (1970). He also published a collection of essays titled *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (1969).

In 1971, Snyder built his own house along the Yuba River in the northern Sierra Nevada mountains. Three years later, he published *Turtle Island*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and established his national reputation. *Axe Handles*, which won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, followed in 1983, as did *Passage through India*, a journal of the trip Snyder made to India in the 1960s.

In 1985, Snyder became a professor at the University of California, Davis, and three more poetry collections followed over the next decade: *Left out in the Rain: New Poems 1947-1986* (1986); *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (1992); and *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), which Snyder had been working on for several decades. Snyder also published *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks, 1964-1979* (1980) and *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), a collection of essays which develop Snyder's ecological ideas. A representative selection of his work was published in 1999 as *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations, 1952-1998*.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

In the first line of "True Night," the poet is fast asleep in bed. Then, there is a clattering sound. Gradually, the poet is pulled awake by the persistent noise. As his mind focuses, he realizes that the sounds are caused by a raccoon that has entered the kitchen. Metal bowls are falling, jars are being pushed against each other, and many plates are also tumbling to the floor. Immediately, he springs up to take action. The word "ritual" suggests that this is not an isolated occurrence but has happened many times before.

The poet rises unsteadily from his bed, grabs a stick and dashes off in the darkness. He shouts angrily and describes himself as a "huge pounding demon," which must be the way the raccoon sees him. But, the raccoons□it now transpires that there are more than one□are too quick for him. They race around the corner, go out of the kitchen, and climb up a tree. The poet knows where they have gone because he hears a scratching sound.

Stanza 2

The poet stands at the foot of the tree. Two young raccoons perch on two dead limbs of the tree and peer down at him from both sides of the trunk. The poet rages and shouts at them for waking him up at night and for making a mess of the kitchen.

Stanza 3

The poet remains standing under the tree but now he is silent. He feels the chill of the night air on his bare flesh. The sensation on his skin seems to wake him up and make him aware of the sensations of the moment that are brought to him by the night. He is aware of his bare foot and the shape it is forming in the gravel as he stands. He is aware of himself with the stick in his hand. It is a moment of awareness that seems to freeze time.

Stanza 4

The poet observes the night. He notices long streaks of cloud that give way to "milky thin" moonlight. He notices the silhouette of the back of the branch of a black pine tree. The moon is full. Up in the hillside, the pine trees are all whispering (presumably as the breeze blows), and the crickets are still singing. But, their song is heard only faintly, from their "cold coves" somewhere in the dark.

Stanza 5

The poet turns and walks slowly back down the path, heading back for bed. He feels chilly and gets goosebumps and his hair blows in the breeze. Then, he repeats his observation of the previous strophe, about the moonlight glow that emanates from around the streaky clouds, and the rustling sound from the pine trees. At that moment, he feels almost ready to dissolve into the night. In a simile, he compares himself to a dandelion head that is about to spread its seeds on the wind. Another simile follows, as he compares himself to a sea anemone that is open and waving in cool water.

Stanza 6

The poet thinks of his own life. He is fifty years old. The next lines are ambiguous. If the lines are read literally, they reveal the poet to be an artisan who works with his hands. The adverb "still" may suggest a tone of regret, that even though he is middle- aged, this is still his occupation. On the other hand, the lines might be interpreted metaphorically. They would then suggest that the poet is a man who works in practical ways in the day-to-day material world, doing what is necessary, rather than being someone who can get carried away by the mystical sense of the presence of the night.

Stanza 7

Here, the poet remembers his sleeping family, including his children at the "shadow pool." This phrase may suggest a place where the shadows of the night comes together (pool), or it might even be a reference to a swimming pool, although that seems unlikely. The poet also remembers his lover, with whom he has lived for many years. The poet follows this with the phrase "True night," which is part of the previous sentence. The fact that it is given a line all to itself shows its significance. Although the syntax is a little puzzling, it is likely that the poet is emphasizing that sleeping during the night, rather than staying awake and immersing oneself in the night's mysterious presence, is the better way for humans to live. This is confirmed by the last two lines of the strophe, which state that it is not advisable to stay awake too long in the night.

Stanzas 8-9

This stanza explains more of what was obliquely suggested in the previous stanza. The night now seems less attractive. The poet's feet are "dusty" and his hair is tangled (in contrast to the "loose waving hair" of stanza five). He goes back to bed, knowing that he still needs more sleep. He needs to be fresh for when the new day dawns. By placing the last line in its own stanza (stanza 9), he invests it with a special significance.

Summary

"True Night" is a poem about a man's awakening by raccoons that have raided his kitchen, his subsequent ranting at the animals, and his eventual calming as he realizes the futility of this nightly ritual and the importance of returning to sleep so that he can be regenerated to fully live his life when day comes.

The poem begins as the narrator describes his sleep state as being sheathed in the black of a bed, a dream womb, from which he is rudely awakened by clatter. The noise of crashing metal bowls, jars and plates alerts the narrator that the kitchen is under attack once again by raccoons.

The all-too-familiar raccoon ritual urges the narrator from his bed, where he grabs a stick and heads to the kitchen. His roars chase the creatures outside and up a tree. The man stands at the base of the tree yelling at the two young raccoons who stare back at him from their precarious perches on two dead limbs on either side of the tree trunk. The narrator bellows once more at the raccoons, admonishing them for waking him nightly with their raids on his kitchen.

As the narrator watches the raccoons, with a sense of futility, it occurs to him that his naked body is cold. He is transported into a different state where he is fully aware of the sensations surrounding him. The man can feel the crunch of the gravel giving way to his bare feet and the feel of the stick in his hand. He has the sensation of time being suspended at this very moment.

The man is also now very aware of his environment, watching a streaky cloud pass, revealing the full moon and the resulting milky thin light. The pine trees stand black against the pale illumination and the sound of crickets rushes up to meet him.

With a slow turn, the man begins to walk back toward his house, noticing on the way how the goose bumps stand out on his skin and the feeling of the breeze rustling his unkempt hair, which must make him appear to be like a puffy dandelion head or an undulating sea anemone. The narrator reveals that he is fifty years old and is "still" doing the same mundane work with nuts and bolts.

The man's thoughts now turn to sleep, the "shadow pool" where his children and lover are which is "true night." He realizes that he, too, must join them, as it is not good to stay awake in the dark for too long a period.

Tucking his dusty feet and tangled hair back into the sheath of his bed, the man slips back into a state of sleep in preparation for the eventual dawn.

Analysis

Although very short, the poem has many literary techniques beginning with the metaphors of the "sheath of sleep" and the "dream womb" that identify the enveloping

state of sleeping from which the narrator is so rudely shaken. Later in the poem, the moonlit night is described as "the night of milk-moonlit thin cloud glow," which helps the reader envisage the pale white cast of light over the dark landscape. The concept of sleep is also described as "the shadow pool" where the children and lover exist. The people are not in an actual pool, but they lie in the floating space of sleep and dream.

Similes are prevalent in the poem, too, for example, when the raccoon noise awakens the man whose "mind rises up to a fact like a fish to a hook." Obviously a mind cannot be caught on a hook but the visual imagery is a descriptive way to say that the man is abruptly awakened once he senses the initial disturbance. An especially vibrant use of simile is the author's description of his blowing hair as "a dandelion head gone to seed about to be blown all away." There should be no doubt as to the image he has in his head of his unruly appearance in the night.

One other technique that is prevalent in the poem is that of alliteration. At the beginning when the narrator describes the intrusion to his sleep, he says "comes a clatter, comes a clatter," the repetitive hard "c" sound indicating the jarring sound which woke him. Another example is the description of the cricket sounds that the author describes as "crickets still cricketing." The use of alliteration adds some drama and lyricism to the poem and gives it depth in spite of its brevity.

Aside from the literary techniques, the author wants the reader to understand the true reason for the poem is to identify that the "true night" is where his family lives in their sleepy states. The author realizes that however beautiful and intriguing a moonlit night may be, it cannot compare to the mysticism of being asleep with the people you love and where each person is regenerated to awake to the real beauty of their lives together in full daylight.

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Themes

The poem depicts a mental process that involves profound shifts in the poet's consciousness. Although the poet tells a story about an outer event—how his sleep was disturbed by raccoons in the kitchen—he also simultaneously describes the inner workings of his own mind. When the poem begins, he is asleep and possibly dreaming (he refers to sleep and the bed itself as a "dream womb"), which means that he either has no conscious awareness (sleep), or an illusory one (dreams).

When he is first awakened by the sounds of the disturbance in the kitchen, he becomes angry. After he rises, he shouts and is ready to chase the raccoons away with a stick. He still shouts at them when they have escaped up a tree. This shows that the narrator is in the typical waking state of consciousness, in which consciousness is centered on the individual sense of "I," and everything else is seen as separate from it. The poet and the raccoon are different; they occupy different worlds, the human and the nonhuman; they are in opposition to each other. The gain of one—the raccoons' raid of the kitchen—is against the interests of the other— the human being who wants to sleep and to keep his home secure from intrusion.

But, this changes in the more reflective section of the poem that begins in stanza 3. Up to this point, the poet has been locked into an adversarial, egobound mode of consciousness. He is concerned only with the ego's need to control and shape the outer world to ensure its own comfort. Now, the stillness of the night begins to work on him. It is as if the raccoons, and his conflict with them, disappear from his awareness. They are not mentioned again. His consciousness shifts from a sense of separation from the world to a sense of oneness. Not only is he alive to all the sights and sounds of the night, no longer obsessed with the irritable workings of his own individual mind, he also seems able, so to speak, to dissolve into the night. He is in touch, a part of the natural world, no longer himself at all (in the limited, individual sense of the word), but connected to and a part of something much larger. The poet has become transparent, translucent, "open" to the natural world. All that held him fixed, rigid and apart from other things has vanished.

The last part of the poem is a journey back from this tranquil oneness with all things into a more practical awareness of the poet's responsibilities in the world. The poet does not mean merely that he must not waste his time idling outside in the beauty of the night because he needs his sleep. Although there is nothing wrong with this literal level of interpretation, the poet may have something deeper in mind. He seems to be suggesting that, although the experience he records of oneness with the natural world is a positive experience, life cannot be lived permanently in this state. The mind must return from oneness to duality, the day-to-day world. Each state has its own validity; neither is repudiated, and there must be a balance between the two in a person's life.

During the course of the poem, the poet has therefore journeyed from sleep to an agitated waking state of consciousness, to a serene contemplative mode of experience, and then back to sleep, enriched by the insights he has gained.

Style

Alliteration and Assonance

The poet uses a variety of poetic devices to create the effect he wants. In the first line, when the poet is fast asleep in bed, the assonance and alliteration, as well as the use of words of one syllable, create an effect that suggests a state of consciousness different from the normal waking state. The assonance is in the repetition of the "e" sounds in "sheath" and "sleep." These two words also show the use of alliteration, the repetition of initial consonants. The alliteration also occurs in the second part of the line, in "black" and "bed."

Onomatopoeia

In lines 3 and 4, "Comes a clatter / Comes a clatter," the alliteration and repetition create an onomatopoeic effect. (Onomatopoeia is the use of words that suggest their meaning by the sounds they make when spoken aloud.)

Simile

The poet also makes telling use of simile. A simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to something else. The two items of comparison are mostly unalike, but the simile identifies one aspect in which they resemble each other. For example, in stanza 5 the poet compares himself to a "dandelion head" that is about to be blown away by the wind, and to a "sea anemone" that waves in the water. On the surface, there appears to be almost nothing that a human being has in common with either dandelion head or sea anemone. But, in the context of the poem, the simile does bring out one similarity. Neither dandelion nor sea anemone resists in any way the forces that play upon it□ wind and water, respectively. They have no individual will or ego. Neither, in this situation, does the poet, who has surrendered entirely to the sensations of the night that play upon him.

Historical Context

Snyder's collection *Turtle Island* (Turtle Island is the ancient Native American name for the North American continent), published in 1974, established him as a national voice in the environmental movement, which gathered considerable strength in the 1970s. Snyder lent his support to issues such as the need to combat industrial pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels, the use of harmful chemicals in agriculture that taint the food supply, and the problem of nuclear waste.

By the time of the publication of *Axe Handles* in 1983, the environmental movement, which had been so successful in bringing environmental concerns to the awareness of the public, was going through a difficult period. In the view of environmentalists, the conservative administration of President Ronald Reagan championed the cause of industry and paid little attention to environmental concerns.

One environmental issue of the 1980s was acid rain, which is the increased acidity in rainfall, caused by sulfur dioxide emitted from coal-fired power plants. Environmental groups called for a 50 percent reduction of sulfur dioxide emissions, a call that was echoed by a report issued by the National Academy of Sciences. The Reagan administration opposed new regulations, however, arguing that more research on the causes of acid rain was needed.

The cleaning up of toxic waste sites was another issue in the 1980s. The Superfund was established in 1980 to help pay the costs of cleaning up polluted sites. In the early 1980s, however, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) came under fire from Democratic members of Congress for its administration of the Superfund. The EPA was accused of misusing funds and favoring the industries that cause the pollution. In 1983, there were 546 hazardous waste sites on the EPA's priority list.

In October 1983, the EPA issued a report stating that the "greenhouse effect," a warming trend in the earth due to the build up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, would begin to be felt in the 1990s. The greenhouse effect is now known as global warming, and despite dire warnings from scientists, the international community has still not taken any effective measures to combat it. It is predicted today, as it was in the 1980s, that global warming will have potentially catastrophic effects on coastlines, climate and agricultural production.

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, which protected listed species (plants and animals) as well as the habitats they rely on, became a source of controversy during the 1980s. Many people argued that in many regions, the ESA restricted economic development to the point that an economic crisis was imminent. The conflict became fixed in the public mind as the "owl versus logging" issue. The owl in question was the Northern spotted owl, which in the 1980s was on the endangered species list. The timber industry vigorously argued that the protection of the spotted owl was costing thousands of jobs because of restrictions on logging. Although research published in the

1990s by a Massachusetts Institute of Technology research group established that this was not the case, for many years the issue polarized opinion on both sides.

There can be little doubt about which side of the issue Snyder was on. No reader of his poetry could fail to see that he has a deep respect for the integrity of each species of animal and plant life and values the ecological diversity that was threatened, not only in the 1980s but also today. "For All," the last poem in *Axe Handles*, makes this abundantly clear. The poem restates the Pledge of Allegiance in a way that redefines the meaning of patriotism, and lays out an environmentalist view of what unity means in its fullest sense:

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

Critical Overview

Snyder's national reputation as a poet was established after his collection *Turtle Island* (1974) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. *Axe Handles*, which was Snyder's first collection of poems since *Turtle Island*, sold thirty thousand copies within six months of publication in 1983. For modern poetry, which does not in general create much public interest, this represented huge sales. It showed that Snyder was one of the few modern poets who was read by ordinary poetry lovers and non-specialists as well as academic critics.

"True Night" was regarded by many as the finest poem in the collection. This was the view, for example, of Robert Schultz and David Wyatt, in "Gary Snyder and the Curve of Return" (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*). For these critics, "True Night" "beautifully captures the tension between the urge to be out and away and the need to settle and stay."

In *Understanding Gary Snyder*, Patrick D. Murphy interpreted the meaning of the poem as follows: "To remain in the dark too long, to be carried away permanently into the wilderness of the land and his own mind, would be to renege on the various promises he had made in his life and his poetry." Murphy also suggested that the final lines of the poem, about the waking that comes with each dawn, might be interpreted in terms of the poet's increasing awareness of his responsibilities to his community and his obligation to the future.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses Snyder's poem in terms of Robert Bly's concept of "double consciousness," as well as shamanism and Zen Buddhism.

In the volume of poems he selected and introduced entitled *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (1980), poet Robert Bly sketches a history of poetry in terms of the kind of human awareness it expresses. What he calls the "old position," which includes most poetry written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, assumes that consciousness existed only in humans and was best expressed through reason, or the intellect. Nature was separate from humans, who believed themselves to be superior to it. Bly calls this period "the peak of human arrogance." During the romantic era in the early nineteenth century, there was a concerted attack on this position, in the work of Goethe, Hölderlin and Novalis in Germany, and Blake, Wordsworth and others in England. The romantics were conscious of a unity in the universe beyond the subject-object relationship with which humans were conditioned to perceive the world. For the romantics, nature was alive with consciousness; it was not a dead thing separate from man. As Wordsworth put it in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," he felt:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused.
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Bly finds the kind of unity of consciousness expressed in romanticism continuing as an underground stream even in the heyday of modernism in the early part of the twentieth century. He cites as examples the work of Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and D. H. Lawrence, among others. After World War II, fresh poetic voices took up the same vision, even though it was not (and still is not) the dominant poetic tradition in American literature. Bly calls this vision "double consciousness," meaning that the poet is aware not only of consciousness residing inside himself but also outside himself in the animal, plant and even mineral world. Quoting the poet Juan Ramón Jimenez, Bly also uses the term "full consciousness" to describe this way of perceiving self and world.

One of the poets named by Bly in this context is Snyder. It is this "full consciousness" that much of Snyder's poetry seems to capture, and this is very apparent in "True Night." The first part of the poem seems at first glance to be an example of what Bly means by the "old position": man trying to control nature, preparing to take a stick to it if any part of it should disturb his comfort, such as the attempted attack by the poet on the

raccoons. But, a careful reading of these lines suggests that something else is at work also.

When the poet declares in lines 14 and 15 of stanza 1, "I'm a huge pounding demon / That roars at raccoons" he is surely describing himself not the way he sees himself, but how the raccoons must see him. It is the equivalent of a sudden switch in point of view, a bursting beyond the confines of the individual consciousness to see with the eyes of the "other." The persona of the poem actually seems unaware that this is happening and slips back into normal everyday consciousness immediately, but it is surely a significant moment. It recalls D. H. Lawrence's poem "Fish," a prolonged effort by the poet to penetrate the being of a fish, to project himself into "fish consciousness." The poem includes the following lines, after the poet imagines the horror experienced by the fish when caught: "And I, a manyfingered horror of daylight to him, / Have made him die." "The many-fingered horror" is the equivalent of the "pounding demon" in "True Night."

Snyder has had a long interest in the shamanism often associated with the Native American tradition. It is this that gives him the gift, poetically speaking, of seeing into, or fully participating in, the consciousness of beings other than himself. In *The Real Work*, Snyder described shamanism as "a teaching from the nonhuman"; it involves "a sense of communication with all of life's network." It is this that is so prominent a feature of "True Night."

It is Snyder's equally long-held interest in Zen Buddhism that is responsible for the fact that "True Night" expresses in its middle section the kind of mental transformation, an emptying of the individual mind, that is the goal of meditation in the Buddhist and other Eastern religious traditions. This can be seen in the way that the poet gradually sinks into the essence of the night. This process can be understood metaphorically as the mind sinking into deeper levels of itself, where the restless ego is stilled and there is a sense of peace and oneness. In *The Real Work*, Snyder compares meditation, an act that takes the mind from surface levels to deeper levels, to the act of "still hunting":

> Still hunting is when you take a stand in the brush or
> some place and then become motionless, and then
> things begin to become alive, and pretty soon you begin
> to see the squirrels and sparrows and raccoons
> and rabbits that were there all the time but just, you
> know, duck out of the way when you look at them
> too closely.

This "still hunting" of the mind that leads to the loss of the individual self in the boundless expansiveness of (in the language of this poem) the night, is conveyed in subtle ways. It is accomplished not only through the words themselves, but in the punctuation and the arrangement of the words of the page. For example, at the end of stanza 4, in the lines "crickets still cricketting / Faint in cold coves in the dark," there is no punctuation mark after "dark" at the end of the line. Grammatically, a period is called for and would certainly have been used had this been prose writing. The lack of any

punctuation at all creates for the reader an effect of open-endedness, the feeling that this particular "dark" may well go on and on without end.

The effect is repeated with even greater force at the end of stanza seven. There is no period, or any other punctuation mark, after "In this dark." A period is surely to be expected here, since the next stanza clearly begins a new sentence. The effect is to once more reinforce the meaning. The dark is endless; it represents, metaphorically speaking, an experience of eternity within the quiet of the poet's consciousness. The absence of punctuation, coupled with the expanse of white space on the page that immediately follows the phrase, helps to give the reader the experience of a "dark" that opens out (like the sea anemone in stanza five) into the endlessness of the blank white space on the page□the equivalent of the blank fullness/emptiness of the poet's own mind at this point.

A similar effect is noticeable in stanza 5, which has no punctuation at all until the period at the end, even though one might expect a period after either "hair" at the end of line 3, or after "pines," at the end of line 5, or even after "beds" at the end of line 2. The effect of the absence of punctuation is to make it impossible to sort out which subject (either "I turn" or "I feel") the dependent clauses belong to. The lack of punctuation conveys the seamlessness of the state of mind the poet describes. Just as the experience of oneness with nature is different from that of normal waking consciousness, since it breaks up the distinctions habitually made between self and world, so too the absence of punctuation thwarts the reader's expectations, leaving him or her without the usual guideposts that help to create meaning.

It is not unusual for Snyder to use methods such as this. As Jody Norton, in "The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder" (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*), states:

When conventionally required elements are omitted
from linguistic structures . . . their meanings are
consequently problematized. But Snyder's procedures
are aimed at more than merely confounding the understanding.
His purpose is to use the grammatical, syntactical,
and semantic spaces that permeate even language . . .
to make possible a kind of immediate knowing
that language is not theoretically designed to produce.

Of course, the meaning of "True Night," as the concluding stanzas show, lies not so much in the experience of oneness with nature but in the need to return to the world of human relationships and responsibilities. No one can remain in that meditative state forever, because humans have to function in the world. People's bonds and relationships with each other are just as important as the mind-expanding practices of meditation.

Snyder addressed this issue in "The East West Interview," in *The Real Work*. He pointed out that the purpose of Zen meditation (zazen) is to experience the simplicity of

being aware of oneself, of coming to know who one is without all the distracting thoughts and sense impressions that normally crowd into the mind. But, the aim is not to stay permanently in meditation, but to come back to everyday life, preferably maintaining spontaneously the experience of being gained during meditation. As Snyder says, "I still wouldn't sit [i.e. in meditation] ten hours a day unless somebody forced me, because there's too much other work in the world to be done. Somebody's got to grow the tomatoes."

It is this thought that is in the mind of the poet at the conclusion of "True Night." His enjoyment of his nocturnal excursion was profound, but there are others who depend on him, and they must have priority.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "True Night," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, O'Grady discusses Snyder's life and works.

Gary Snyder is one of the most important American poets of the second half of the twentieth century. He has written with eloquence, intellectual power, and mythopoeic grandeur in celebration and defense of the natural world. In his *With Eye and Ear* (1970) the poet Kenneth Rexroth describes Snyder as "a master of challenge and confrontation, not because he seeks controversy but because his values are so conspicuous, so plainly stated in the context of simple, sensuous, impassioned fact that they cannot be dodged." Although Snyder has achieved renown for his role in introducing American readers to the literature and spirit of Asia, he is first and foremost a writer of the American West.

Gary Sherman Snyder was born in San Francisco on 8 May 1930, during the early months of the Great Depression. His mother, Lois Wilkey Snyder, was a Texan, some of whose ancestors had lived in Kansas; his father, Harold Snyder, was a native of Washington State. A year and a half after Snyder's birth the family moved to a farm north of Seattle, where they scratched out a meager income amid the stumps of a cutover forest. Snyder was deeply imbued with his parents' working-class, West-Coast, left-wing ideas, and in the rain forests and mountain landscapes of the Puget Sound region he came to the realization that the environment serves more complex human needs than that for natural resources. This recognition later emerged as his most profound theme, both as a writer and a political activist.

From childhood Snyder was a voracious reader. His mother, a writer herself, encouraged her son's literary sensibility by taking him on weekly excursions to the public library in the University District of Seattle, where he would check out ten to twelve books a week. In his teenage years Snyder discovered the writings of John Muir and Robinson Jeffers, two authors widely regarded by critics as his literary precursors. While these writers served to focus his thinking along the lines of what he now refers to as "Bioregionalism," Snyder's aesthetic foundations had already been laid by his childhood reading of such Western writers as Stewart Edward White, H. L. Davis, Charles Erskin Scott Wood, and Oliver La Farge, as well as books, both ethnographic and literary, about Native American cultures.

At the beginning of World War II the Snyders moved to a low-income housing project in Portland, Oregon. When his parents' marriage dissolved near the end of the war, Snyder and his younger sister, Anthea, remained with their mother. Although he was living in the city, his feeling for the Western landscape was fortified by his view of the snowy "Guardian Peaks" of the Columbia Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens, and Mount Adams that hovered on the Portland horizon. In the summer of 1945 Snyder ascended Mount St. Helens as part of an old-style climbing party from the YMCA camp at Spirit Lake. The following year he joined the Mazamas, a mountaineering organization based in Portland; he went on to climb many of the highest peaks in the Northwest. His

enthusiasm for the landscape of the Pacific Slope is echoed in the title of his magnum opus, *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996).

Although he had a few bylines in the Lincoln High School student newspaper, Snyder's first formal publication appeared in 1946 in the mountaineering organization's annual, *Mazama*. "A Young Mazama's Idea of a Mount Hood Climb" is a tongue-in-cheek account of ascending the snowcapped 11,239-foot volcano and suggests that Snyder was something of a Young Turk among the postwar Northwest mountaineers. "You say you want to climb Mt. Hood?" he writes. "Don't do it! You had just better listen to me, because I'm an experienced mountaineer. I'm the one who can tell you which end of an ice axe you hold on to." After vigorously discouraging his readers from attempting the mountain, he concludes: "I'm climbing it again next week." The energy and sense of humor in this little-known essay are extraordinary for a sixteen-year-old author.

During the summer of 1947, near the base of Mount St. Helens, Snyder composed "Elk Trails," a poem that was not published until the 1986 collection *Left out in the Rain: New Poems 1947- 1985*. Although a youthful effort, it anticipates the thrust of Snyder's lifework:

Ancient, world-old Elk paths
Narrow, dusty Elk paths
Wide-trampled, muddy,
Aimless . . . wandering . . .
Everchanging Elk paths.

Some readers may detect a hint of the rhythms of Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926) in these lines, but more important is Snyder's trademark fidelity to natural detail: this narrator will not describe anything he has not experienced himself:

I have walked you, ancient trails,
Along the narrow rocky ridges
High above the mountains that
Make up your world:
Looking down on giant trees, silent
In the purple shadows of ravines□
Above the high, steep-slanting meadows
Where sun-softened snowfields share the earth
With flowers.

The speaker, a literary mountain man of sorts, becomes the reader's guide along the trail: he is levelheaded, skilled in woodcraft, and showing admirable restraint in his diction. At one point, however, he pushes the poem past the ordinary limits of natural history, suddenly identifying the elk as "A God coarse-haired, steel-muscled, / Thinflanked and musky." Just as quickly, he brings his readers back to earth, where they find that this "God" is "Used to sleeping lonely / In the snow, or napping in the mountain

grasses / On warm summer afternoons, high in the meadows"□exactly where one would expect to find an elk in the Western mountains. In this poem, as in many others in the Snyder canon, boundaries between realms of consciousness are not simply transgressed but are dissolved altogether, revealing the interconnectedness of all things. Some commentators have referred to this aspect of Snyder's work as his "ecological worldview," but such a label is too reductive for Snyder, whose independence of thought and spirit defy easy classification.

The conclusion of "Elk Trails" delivers an implicit Romantic critique of a human society that has fallen out of touch with nature and its ways, a theme that Snyder takes up repeatedly□perhaps most grandly in *Turtle Island* (1974), the volume for which he was awarded the 1975 Pulitzer Prize.

In the fall of 1947 Snyder entered Reed College in Portland on a scholarship. One of his professors, Lloyd Reynolds, had a passion for the art of calligraphy and the poetry of William Blake. Reynolds had a life-shaping influence not only on Snyder but also on several generations of writers who received their education at the small liberalarts college. At Reed, Snyder made friends who shared his love for literature, including his fellow poets Lew Welch and Philip Whalen.

Important as formal education has been for him, Snyder's writings are at least as deeply rooted in the experience he acquired on the various jobs he has held, most of them outdoors. In 1949, during the summer between his sophomore and junior years, he shipped out as a merchant seaman; in 1950 he was employed excavating an archaeological site. "As I grew into young manhood in the Pacific Northwest," he reflects in *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), "advised by a cedar tree, learning the history of my region, practicing mountaineering, studying the native cultures, and inventing little rituals to keep my spirit sane, I was often supporting myself by the woodcutting skills I learned on the Depression stump-farm." Snyder cherishes a wellmaintained tool as much as a well-placed word. He uses the phrase "the real work" to refer to his practice of poetry, a spiritual melding of literary and physical labor.

In 1950 Snyder married a Reed classmate, Alison Gass; they lived together for only two months. Pursuing a dual major in literature and anthropology, he wrote a thesis in his senior year that analyzed a myth of the Haida, a coastal British Columbia native people. One of his former professors later remarked that it was the most photocopied Reed thesis of all time. It was published in 1979 as *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*. The book is a scholarly work of some intrinsic interest, but it is most valuable for the light it sheds on the patterns of Snyder's development: by age twenty-one he had reached a level of intellectual sophistication rivaling that of most Ph.Ds. Clearly evident in this thesis is the poet's preoccupation with themes that recur in his work to the present day: Native American culture, the natural landscape, and the relationship between myth and literature. Yet, as Snyder himself cautions in the preface he wrote some twenty-seven years later, the essay "is about twentieth century occidental thinking as much as Dream Time, the Old Ways, or the Haida." Nevertheless, it conveys his respect for, and facility with, scholarly method.

After graduating from Reed in 1951 Snyder spent the summer working on a logging operation, setting choker cables and scaling timber on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation on the east side of the Oregon Cascades. Then he hitchhiked to Indiana University to begin graduate study in anthropology but remained there only a semester. In early 1952 he made his way to San Francisco and moved in with Whalen. That same year he and his wife were divorced.

In 1953 Snyder met Rexroth, who became a valued, albeit irascible, friend and mentor. Rexroth served as a sort of poetic elder for the young writers of Snyder's generation, presiding over the literary movement later known as the "San Francisco Renaissance," a loose affiliation of like-minded writers, artists, and intellectuals that also included Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Michael McClure. In a 1977 interview Snyder commented on those years: "San Francisco taught me what a city could be, and saved me from having to go to Europe." Also in 1953 Snyder took up residence in Berkeley and enrolled in the graduate school of the Department of East African Languages at the University of California; he remained there for the next three years but did not receive a degree.

Snyder was able to get away from the city each summer and find employment in the forests of the Pacific Slope. In the summer of 1952 he worked as a fire lookout on Crater Mountain in the Cascades of Washington, an experience that proved central to his aesthetic and spiritual development. Snyder chronicled the events of these summers in his diary and later published it as "Lookout's Journal," the opening section of his 1969 prose collection *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries for Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*. He might have continued as a lookout for the Forest Service for several more summers, but he was denied subsequent employment because of his alleged communist sympathies.

In the summer of 1955 Snyder worked on a trail crew in Yosemite National Park. Although he had been writing poetry since high school, the poems that came to him in the Yosemite high country that summer were in a voice he recognized at once as uniquely his own. His first published volume, *Riprap* (1959), he explains in his "Statement on Poetics" in Donald M. Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*, "is really a class of poems I wrote under the influence of the geology of the Sierra Nevada and the daily trail-crew work of picking up and placing granite stones in tight cobble patterns on hard slab." The title poem, one of Snyder's best-known pieces, not only serves as a statement of his poetics but also provides a glimpse into the Western American backcountry cultural practice of trail-making:

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind
in space and time:
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall
riprap of things

In the opening of the volume the poet provides a sort of trail map to the poems that follow by defining *riprap* as "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains." "Riprap" and the other Yosemite poems in the volume □"Piute Creek," "Milton by Firelight," "Above Pate Valley," "Water," and "Hay for the Horses"□remain favorites with his audience, which includes Park Service employees as well as academic literary critics. The book is dedicated to the men he worked with on the trail crew that summer and on the oil tanker *Sappa Creek* in 1957- 1958. The backcountry poems in *Riprap* and subsequent volumes preserve something of the lore of the American West that otherwise might have been lost. In addition to their literary value, Snyder's writings are a trove of anthropological information on the American West in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In the fall of 1955 Snyder took up residence in Berkeley. There he met the poet Allen Ginsberg, who had recently moved from the East Coast. Soon Ginsberg's friend Jack Kerouac appeared on the scene. In October, Snyder participated in a poetry reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, where Ginsberg gave the inaugural performance of his poem *Howl*. In the early months of 1956 Snyder moved into a flimsy shack in a eucalyptus grove on a hillside in Marin County, north of San Francisco, converting the structure into a meditation hall where he and others could practice Zen Buddhism. Kerouac shared these quarters with Snyder during the month of April. In "Migration of Birds" in *Riprap* Snyder captures one of the more contemplative moments the two writers shared:

I saw the redwood post
Leaning in clod ground
Tangled in a bush of yellow flowers
Higher than my head, through which we push
Every time we come inside□
The shadow network of the sunshine
through its vines. White-crowned sparrows
Make tremendous singings in the trees
The rooster down the valley crows and crows.
Jack Kerouac outside, behind my back
Reads the *Diamond Sutra* in the sun.

The straightforward description and understated emotion give the poem a quality that in Japanese literary aesthetics is called *yugen*, a term that translates as "quiet beauty" or "elegant simplicity." Snyder perfected this poetic technique early in his career, having encountered outstanding examples of it in his reading of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. He also had native models in the poetry of Rexroth, especially in the latter's *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (1944) and *The Signature of All Things* (1950). These two West Coast writers are, more than anyone else, responsible for bringing the influence of classical Buddhism into American poetry.

The events of this lively period in West Coast literary history were translated into fiction by Kerouac in his novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958), in which the character Japhy Ryder is based on Snyder. This fictional portrayal by his friend and literary compatriot proved

both a boon and a curse to Snyder. The novel brought him a share of public attention, but the idealized characterization that emerges in these pages□of a youthful, upbeat, goatish, self-sufficient mountaineer-cum-Buddhistsaint □deflects attention from the real-life Snyder and his own concerns, concerns that are often far removed from those of Japhy Ryder. Years later, in *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (1978), by Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, Snyder offered an astute summation of the importance of Kerouac's work□an analysis that applies equally to Snyder's prose and poetry: "Jack was, in a sense, a twentieth-century American mythographer. And that's why maybe those novels will stand up, because they will be one of the best statements of the myth of the twentieth century."

Snyder's association with Kerouac and with Ginsberg, who became a close lifelong friend, resulted in Snyder mistakenly being labeled a "Beat Poet," a designation he has robustly rejected. He maintained friendships with some of the leading figures of the Beat Generation, and he shared their skepticism about the political and social conservatism of the Eisenhower era; Snyder's work, however, in its political engagement and attention to nature, provides a sharp contrast to the apolitical and urban Beat aesthetic. Even so, Snyder's affiliation with Ginsberg and Kerouac constitutes an important chapter in the literary history of the West Coast. In profound and far-reaching ways, these writers who came together for a time in the mid 1950s in northern California achieved a critical mass of social and artistic awareness that soon exploded on a national level. What was called a renaissance in San Francisco in the 1950s became the "counterculture" of the 1960s, and it was all imagined first by these poets.

Snyder, however, was out of the country for much of the decade when his influence reached major proportions. In May 1956 he departed for Japan. In Kyoto he entered a Buddhist monastery and practiced Zen meditation. He soon left the monastery, but he took up residence nearby and continued his studies. His sojourn in Asia lasted until 1968 and was interrupted by a tour as a merchant seaman and occasional visits to the United States, including a teaching stint at the University of California. In Kyoto he found a lively community of Japanese and American artists and intellectuals, and he kept in close contact with his friends in the United States, who kept him informed of events during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. He married the poet Joanne Kyger in 1960; they were divorced in 1965. In 1967 he married Masa Uehara in a ceremony on the rim of an active volcano off the coast of Japan. The couple had two sons, Kai in 1968 and Gen in 1969. The marriage ended in divorce in 1987.

While in Asia, Snyder published a steady stream of poetry and prose: *Myths & Texts* in 1960; *Six Sections from Mountains & Rivers without End* and a new edition of *Riprap*, which included his translations of the "Cold Mountain Poems" of the ancient Chinese poet Han Shan, in 1965; and *A Range of Poems* in 1966. In 1968 New Directions in New York published *The Back Country*, Snyder's first book to be brought out by a major U.S. publisher (it had been published in London in 1967). In 1969 the prose collection *Earth House Hold* was published, its title a play on the Greek root of the word *ecology*.

While all of these books to varying degrees provide insight into themes identifiably "Western" or "West Coast"□the natural environment, Native Americans, and strenuous

labor in the woods—the most crucial volume in this regard is *Myths & Texts*, a long poetic sequence that Snyder composed between 1952 and 1956. The forty-eight poems are arranged in three sections, titled "Logging," "Hunting," and "Burning." In its nonlinear progression and abundance of allusion, most notably to Buddhist and Native American sources, *Myths & Texts* presents challenges to the reader akin to those found in modernist epics such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1925-1968).

The last poem in *Myths & Texts* gives an insight into Snyder's poetics and his evolving vision for the American West. It is divided into two sections, "the text" and "the myth." The first section reads as a diary entry in verse:

Sourdough mountain called a fire in:
Up Thunder Creek, high on a ridge.
Hiked eighteen hours, finally found
A snag and a hundred feet around on fire

This part of the poem is descriptive and matter- of-fact, narrating the events of a particular day in the northern Cascades in the summer of 1952 when the speaker and others were called to fight a forest fire. By the end of this subsection, rain has come and extinguished the fire:

We slept in mud and ashes,
Woke at dawn, the fire was out,
The sky was clear, we saw
The last glimmer of the morning star.

In the way it hews closely to the facts, "the text" is historical and realistic in tone.

In contrast, "the myth"—which serves as the conclusion not only to the poem but also to the book—takes place on a nonspatial and ahistorical level of consciousness, as is immediately apparent in the opening lines: "Fire up Thunder Creek and the mountain— / troy's burning!" The physical realm, which is conditioned by space and time, is not abandoned altogether by the narrator—Thunder Creek, an actual stream in the Cascades of Washington, remains. With his mythic eye, however, the speaker sees far more going on in this watershed than any Forest Service management plan can account for; the poet directs attention to the numinous qualities that always attend ordinary events if consciousness is properly attuned. A signature quality of Snyder's poetics is that, while acknowledging the split between the historical and the mythical, he refuses to abandon one for the other. Instead, he shows how various realms of consciousness interpenetrate one another: "The mountains are your mind," he proclaims.

As the myth courses toward its conclusion, the speaker invokes Buddhist cosmology but arrives finally at an American myth by alluding to the last line of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854):

Rain falls for centuries
Soaking the loose rocks in space

Sweet rain, the fire's out
The black snag glistens in the rain
& the last wisp of smoke floats up
Into the absolute cold
Into the spiral whorls of fire
The storms of the Milky Way
"Buddha incense in an empty world"
Black pit cold and light-year
Flame tongue of the dragon
Licks the sun
The sun is but a morning star

In *Myths & Texts*, as well as in his subsequent books, Snyder lends a new myth to the American West that supersedes the well-entrenched conquest narratives that glorify resource extraction and cultural extermination. In the preface to the 1978 edition of the book he writes: "The effort of this kind of poetry remains one of our most challenging enterprises: here on Occupied Turtle Island"□a term Snyder uses to refer to the North American continent, borrowed from a Seneca myth□"we are most of us a still rootless population of non-natives who don't even know the plants or where our water comes from."

On his return to California in 1968 Snyder homesteaded on land he had purchased with Ginsberg and others in the "Gold Country" of the Sierra Nevada foothills. In sharp contrast to the nineteenth- century gold-seekers, whose hydraulic mining operations gouged out vast swaths of terrain and silted up the region's clear-flowing rivers, Snyder, his family, and some like-minded neighbors sought a way of life that honored the nonhuman world. He called his house "Kitkitdizze," the local Indian word for an aromatic shrub usually referred to as "Mountain Misery"□a name suggestive of the cultural attitude the poet seeks to change. In his 1995 collection, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds. New and Selected Prose*, Snyder offers an optimistic reflection: "The need for ecological literacy, the sense of home watershed, and a better understanding of our stake in public lands are beginning to permeate the consciousness of the larger society."

Snyder's deepening commitment to a specific place in the American West is reflected in the books he published during the 1970s and 1980s. In *Regarding Wave* (1969), *Turtle Island*, *Axe Handles* (1983), and a substantial number of the poems in *Left out in the Rain: New Poems 1947-1985* he composed a body of poetry that puts him in the company of such landscape visionaries as John Muir, John Wesley Powell, and Mary Hunter Austin. In a 7 February 1978 letter to the San Francisco *Chronicle* Snyder explained, "I know it's hard for people still accustomed to thinking with an essentially European mindset to take 'place' seriously. But one of the exciting possibilities for the future will be the rise of an artistic consciousness that has begun to draw deeply on the spirit of the place."

A haunting manifestation of the spirit of place occurs in "For/From Lew," included in *Axe Handles*. The speaker encounters the ghost of Snyder's old friend and college

classmate Welch, who disappeared into the thick forest and chaparral around Kitkitdizze in 1971, a presumed suicide:

Lew Welch just turned up one day,
live as you and me. "D□□, Lew," I said,
"you didn't shoot yourself after all."
"Yes I did" he said,
and even then I felt the tingling down my back.
"Yes you did, too" I said□"I can feel it now."
"Yeah" he said,
"There's a basic fear between your world and
mine. I don't know why.
What I came to say was,
teach the children about the cycles.
The life cycles. All the other cycles.
That's what it's about, and it's all forgot."

Dead but not gone, Snyder's friend becomes a genius loci, an intermediary between the human and nonhuman realms. Welch appears again in the penultimate poem in *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (1992), "For Lew Welch in a Snowstorm." The speaker addresses Welch, observing how all people, things, and even words are subject to decay. The poem concludes:

All those years and their moments□
Crackling bacon, slamming car doors,
Poems tried out on friends,
Will be one more archive,
One more shaky text.

But life continues in the kitchen
Where we still laugh and cook,
Watching snow.

Individual lives pass, but life goes on. Although memory becomes an increasingly prominent subject in Snyder's later work, he does not indulge in sentimentality but ponders one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism□that there is no inherent self-nature. This concept, in turn, becomes a major theme in the long poem *Mountains and Rivers without End*.

Forty years in the making and much anticipated by readers since early sections appeared in the 1960s, *Mountains and Rivers without End* is the great long poem of the West. Well received by reviewers, the book became, only one year after its publication, the subject of a year-long humanities seminar at Stanford University, a level of critical acknowledgment rare for a living writer. The book comprises thirty-nine poems woven into a complex tapestry, drawing on such sources as Buddhism, literature, anthropology, Native American myth, natural history, and the poet's experience. Although *Mountains and Rivers without End* opens with a poem devoted to a description of a Chinese

landscape painting, the book's provenance is the American West. In an interview with John P. O'Grady that focused on his career as a West Coast writer, Snyder said of *Mountains and Rivers without End*: "In a sense, what I've done there is globalize the West. . . . it is a Western poem that starts and ends in the West, and never is far from it, but it uses the West, the Western landscape, almost as a metaphor for the whole planet□it becomes the whole planet."

Snyder's most recent volumes of prose, *The Practice of the Wild* and *A Place in Space*, reflect a lifetime of philosophical thought on the human relationship to place and are major contributions to environmental philosophy. While maintaining the highest scholarly standards, Snyder's philosophical writing is not filled with academic jargon; he conveys his ideas in a spare and direct style that retains all the rhetorical power of his poetry. His recurring theme of modern culture's need to "reinhabit" the North American continent is eloquently summarized in "The Rediscovery of Turtle Island" in *A Place in Space*:

> Ultimately we can all lay claim to the term native
> and the songs and dances, the beads and feathers, and
> the profound responsibilities that go with it. We are
> all indigenous to this planet, this mosaic of wild gardens
> we are being called by nature and history to
> reinhabit in good spirit. Part of that responsibility is
> to choose a place. To restore the land one must live
> and work in a place. To work in a place is to work
> with others. People who work together in a place become
> a community, and a community, in time, grows
> a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore
> culture.

In comparison to the abundance of critical analyses of Snyder's poetry, the response to his prose has lagged considerably. In the interview with O'Grady Snyder speculated that this neglect may be the result of the unfamiliar demands his books make upon readers: "There's an intellectual push there that is not part of mainstream intellectual life. There are a lot of ideas there that are new to a lot of people."

As he approached his seventieth birthday in 1999, Snyder's career showed no signs of slowing. He has long been acknowledged as a significant teacher as well as a poet, but it was not until 1986 that he formalized this aspect of his career by joining the faculty at the University of California, Davis, where, in addition to teaching literature and creative writing classes, he was instrumental in the founding of its Nature and Culture Program. With his wife, Carole Koda, whom he married in 1991, he continues to live at Kitkitdizze. The couple has been active in local environmental politics, working closely with their neighbors and the Bureau of Land Management in developing an innovative, cooperative management agreement for nearby public lands.

Snyder is editing his journals, which extend back to his teenage years. In early 1997 he was awarded the Bollingen Prize, the nation's most prestigious honor for a poet, and

shortly thereafter he received the John Hay Award for Nature Writing. In conferring the Bollingen Prize, the judges observed:

> Gary Snyder, throughout a long and distinguished career, has been doing what he refers to in one poem as "the real work." "The real work" refers to writing poetry, an unprecedented kind of poetry, in which the most adventurous technique is put at the service of the great themes of nature and love. He has brought together the physical life and the inward life of the spirit to write poetry as solid and yet as constantly changing as the mountains and rivers of his American □and universal□landscape.

This otherwise excellent summary of Snyder's work neglects to mention how important the vast public lands of the American West have been to him. As a writer he has certainly put himself in the service of literature's "great themes," but more significantly he has put himself in the service of the nonhuman world, a constituency not ordinarily accorded a voice in mainstream American culture.

Gary Snyder's importance to the literature and the environmental philosophy of the American West has been great. In the words of another of his old friends, the writer and visionary thinker Alan Watts: "I can only say that a universe which has manifested Gary Snyder could never be called a failure."

Source: John P. O'Grady, "Gary Snyder," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 212, *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers, Second Series*, edited by Richard H. Cracroft, Gale, 1999, pp. 269-77.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, McGuirk discusses the life and poetry of Snyder.

As Wendell Berry writes in his contribution to *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life* (1991), "One thing that distinguishes Gary Snyder among his literary contemporaries is his willingness to address himself, in his life and in his work, to hard practical questions." Snyder's work is informed by anarchist and union politics, Amerindian lore, Zen Buddhism, and a pragmatic commitment to and delight in the daily work that sustains community. It is important to emphasize the integrity but insufficiency of Snyder's poetry to his total cultural project. As is suggested by his title *The Practice of the Wild*, a 1990 essay collection, he wants to heal the division between practice, a cultural activity, and the wild by reading the wild itself as a culture. His aim in his work and in his life has been to envision and enact the reinhabitation of the American land on a sustainable basis. One of the most highly regarded postwar American poets, Snyder has produced a large body of poetry intelligible to the political and spiritual aspirations of many readers not normally concerned with poetry.

Snyder was born in San Francisco and raised in a poor family on a farm just north of Seattle during the Depression. His family tradition was radical on both sides□socialist and atheist. His mother studied writing at the University of Washington and introduced him to poetry. He attended Lincoln High School in Portland, where he spent his adolescent years with his younger sister, Anthea, and his mother, who worked as reporter. During these years he had his first experience of wilderness as a member of the Mazama Mountain Climbers. In 1957 he went to Reed College in Portland on a scholarship, where he met the poets Philip Whalen and Lew Welch, who became his lifelong friends, and majored in English and anthropology.

Although his literary education reflected the formalist criticism of the time, anthropology exposed him to other traditions and conceptions of the cultural role of literature. Already at this time he was recognized for his independence, unconventionality, industry, and learning. The 159 page honors thesis he wrote in 1951, *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth* (1979), examined the West Coast tribe's mythology from different methodological points of view and set him on the cross-cultural path he has followed in his work ever since. From 1950 to 1952 he was married to Alison Gass. In 1951 Snyder hitchhiked east to attend graduate school at Indiana University but dropped out after one semester, heading west again to enroll in Japanese and Chinese courses at the University of California at Berkeley in order to prepare himself for a trip to Japan to study Zen. He worked summers as a U.S. Forest Service lookout (1952-1953), a logging crewman in Oregon (1954), and a trail crewman in Yosemite National Park (1955), experiences that would inform his first published books.

In November 1955 Snyder participated in the famous Six Gallery reading in San Francisco, where his friend Allen Ginsberg read "Howl" publicly for the first time, a scene replayed in Jack Kerouac's Beat novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958). This novel, in which Snyder is fictionalized as Dharma hero Japhy Ryder, inaugurated Snyder's career

as public figure well before he became famous as a poet and stamped him with a lingering, and ultimately limiting, Beat identity. The Beat writers' apparently freewheeling religiosity, their casual dress and manners, their adoption of jazz, and their experiments with sex and mind-altering drugs set them deliberately at odds with the establishment intelligentsia and cultural elite of the 1950s. One reviewer called them "the know-nothing Beats," but such a view belies the serious spiritual and political commitments of Snyder and many Beat figures.

The poems of *Riprap* (1959) present the young seeker-worker divesting himself of civilization "All the junk that goes with being human / Drops away" but an alternative vision is not clearly articulated as yet. In "Piute Greek" he encounters the sublime otherness of austere nature but is still unsure of his welcome there. What he is sure of is his deep respect for ordinary manual work and for his teachers among ordinary workers, to whom he dedicates the book. On the title page he defines the word *riprap* as "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains." He makes it the central metaphor of the collection in the beginning of the title poem that is often taken as an *ars poetica:*

Lay down these words
Before your mind like rocks.
placed solid, by hands
In choice of place, set
Before the body of the mind.

"Poetry," as Snyder writes in *Myths & Texts* (1960), is "a riprap on the slick rock of metaphysics." "Riprap" is significant first because it presents Snyder's solution to the Romantic problem of the relation between mind and nature, though his solution may be read as either advancing or diverging from that tradition: to give words in poems the qualities of things in nature. The poem is also important because it links the poetic solution to a life problem through a key Snyder concept: *work.* Snyder's "nature poetry" is not about aesthetic perception of a pristine nature but about work as an activity that mediates between humans and the material world. For Snyder the acts of the mind are grounded in physical activity. As he noted in his contribution to the classic anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), "I've just recently come to realize that the rhythms of my poems follow the rhythms of the physical work I'm doing . . . at any given time."

Snyder writes in the American tradition articulated by William Carlos Williams in *Paterson* (1963), a poetry that discovers "no ideas but in things," or better, poetry as "a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands." Although as a West Coast poet he looks to Asia for supplements to his American experience rather than to Europe, he occasionally invokes the Western tradition to define his difference from it. In "Milton by Firelight," Satan is compared to the poet's trail-crew leader, Roy Marchbanks. The poem juxtaposes Satan's exclamation of despair upon seeing the unfallen Adam and Eve in the garden "O hell, what do mine eyes / with grief behold?" and a "Singlejack miner, who can sense / The vein and cleavage / In the very guts of rock." The juxtaposition provokes a question: "What use, Milton, a silly story / Of our lost general parents, eaters of fruit?" The crisis that captures Milton's imagination is rejected in favor of the grounded

selves of the miner and an Indian boy who live in the context of the ancient sierras: "No paradise, no fall, / Only the weathering land." While Snyder finds among workers types of the poet-sage, he also looks to history. At Berkeley he translated the work of Han Shan (650-727), a hermit who lived during the T'ang dynasty, which he includes as "Cold Mountain Poems" in the collection *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* (1965). Han Shan "and his sidekick," Snyder writes, "became great favorites with Zen painters of later days□the scroll, the broom, the wild hair and laughter." Han Shan disdained ambition and the usual run of social life; instead, he chose a place in "a tangle of cliffs," where he reveled in "the pearl of the Buddha-nature." Cold Mountain becomes a metaphor for a life lived free and an expression of Buddhist metaphysics:

Cold Mountain is a house
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The cast wall beats on the west wall
At the center nothing.

Myths & Texts, which was begun in 1952 and finished in 1956, is a more systematic and ambitious volume. Except for the still unfinished "Mountains and Rivers without End," published in six sections in 1965, it is the only volume of his work conceived as a whole rather than as a collection. The book was written under the influence of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, which Snyder read as an undergraduate. Snyder shares Pound's stress on concision, on the natural object as the adequate symbol, and on presentation rather than expression. Image-line units similar to Pound's□for example, a line such as "Thick frost on the pine bow"□are standard. The influence is structural as well as stylistic, most obviously in the organization of a variety of texts, modes, documents, and anecdotes according to the principle of juxtaposition, or collage, rather than narrative or exposition.

Myths & Texts has received less critical attention than either *Riprap* or subsequent books. It is more forbidding partly because of the absence of a consistent subjective center, or lyric "I"□the likable, straightforward speaker of the typical Snyder poem□and partly because of the inconclusiveness of its radically allusive poetics. It is less interesting as poetic autobiography than as technical experiment reflecting Snyder's early work experience and preoccupations. As Patrick Murphy observes in his essay on *Myths & Texts* in the collection *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder* (1991), which he edited, critics have observed two principals of structure underlying the poem: it is a quest, or, according to Lee Bartlett in "Gary Snyder's *Myths & Texts* and the Monomyth" (also published in *Critical Essays*), it is a three-part progression adding up to what Joseph Campbell calls a "monomyth." The book's three sections, "Logging," "Hunting," and "Burning," correspond, Bartlett argues, to "separation□initiation□return," a journey from an Apollonian vision of experience to a Dionysian one. Murphy argues that the volume is better understood as structured by the alternation and interpenetration of "texts," or phenomenal experience, and "myths," or cultural interpretations.

Part 1, "Logging," is based on Snyder's own logging experience in Oregon, but its thematic core is not personal. It comments on the exploitative and ultimately *culturally* destructive logging enterprise by juxtaposing different levels of experiences, texts, and myths. Thoreau declared that "The sun is but a morning star," but Snyder opens with a literalizing counter, stating that "the morning star is not a star"; he then cites a second position, that "The May Queen / Is the survival of / A pre-human rutting season" and tacitly relates this to images of contemporary San Francisco through juxtaposition: "Green comes out of the ground / Birds squabble / Young girls run mad with the pine bough." The second poem tells a different story in *its* selected myths and texts. Exodus 34:13□"But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves"□stands as a metonym for Western attitudes to the wild and to the investment of the wild with sacred meaning by premodern peoples. The "text" of this "myth" is that both in China and elsewhere ancient forests have long since been logged; "San Francisco 2 × 4s / were the woods around Seattle." In this poem the poet is waking "from bitter dreams" to the real world of logging: "250,000 board-feet a day / If both Cats keep working / & nobody gets hurt."

The second section, "Hunting," initiates a process of healing. Hunting describes a relationship with the natural world that may be either merely destructive or productive of integral relations. It is closely linked to shamanism, which is in turn linked to poetry. All three are cultural activities□forms of meditation or ritual□that aim to bring the hunter-shaman-poet into intimate contact with animals. "The shaman-poet," as Snyder writes in *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries for Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (1969), "is simply a man whose mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams." Shamanism is Snyder's metaphor for imagining an ideology of human-animal-wild relations to replace the mainline Western ideology.

The first poem of the Hunting section, "first shaman song," situates Snyder on an apparent vision- quest, fasting in isolation to achieve a dislocation of the self and open a chink to shamanistic wisdom. The section then enacts textually a shamanistic experience. In "this poem is for bear" Snyder retells a local native tale□shamanistic lore□about the union of a woman and a bear. Commenting on the story, the poet debunks his own potential, as if he is not yet ready for transformation. The critical piece in the section is "this poem is for deer." It depicts first the ugly practice of shooting deer from cars, in which Snyder has apparently been involved at least once, and moves toward an experience of expiation or *kenosis*: "Deer don't want to die for me. / I'll drink sea-water / Sleep on beach pebbles in the rain / Until the deer come down to die / in pity for my pain."

The third section opens with "second shaman song," in which the speaker initiates a second phase of his wilderness quest, "Quivering in nerve and muscle / Hung in the pelvic cradle / Bones propped against roots / A blind flicker of nerve. . . . / A mudstreaked thigh." The section then presents a series of purgative confrontations with evil, fear, and death that include "Maudgalyayana saw hell" and "Maitreya the future Buddha." One poem describes John Muir on Mount Ritter. Despairing of finding a foothold or handhold to lead him from the rock face, Muir discovers that "life blaze[es] / Forth again with a preternatural clearness. . . . every rift and flaw in / The rock was seen

as through a microscope." Snyder achieves a vision of the Earth as feminine Buddhist Prajna: "The Mother whose body is the Universe / Whose breasts are Sun and Moon, / the statue of Prajna / From Java: the quiet smile, / The naked breasts."

The volume ends by juxtaposing the literal and mythical versions of an event. The final poem describes a fire on Sourdough Mountain that is fought all night. In the morning the firefighters "saw / the last glimmer of the morning star." Snyder gives the event mythical significance by alluding to the ancient city of Troy burning. He asserts that the "mountains are your mind" and sees "the last wisp of smoke float up / Into the absolute cold / Into the spiral whorls of fire / The storms of the Milky Way" as "'Buddha incense in an empty world.'" With this successful conclusion to the "alternation and interpenetration" of myth and text, he is able to say with Thoreau in the last line that "the sun is but a morning star" and look forward to regeneration.

Between 1956, when he won a First American Zen Centre scholarship, and 1968, when he returned to the United States permanently, Snyder spent most of his time in Kyoto, Japan, where he studied as a lay monk in the rigorous Rinzai sect of Zen under his beloved teacher Oda Sesso Roshi, who died in 1966. He was married to the poet Joanne Kyger between 1960 and 1964. *The Back Country* (1967) charts his experience of living in Japan, his visit to India with Kyger and Allen Ginsberg in 1962, and his first return to the United States in 1966. Along with *Regarding Wave* (1969) and *Earth House Hold*, a collection of notes, reviews, and essays, *The Back Country* established Snyder as a poet and extended his fame as a countercultural hero. The first critical article on his work was published in 1968.

Studying Zen as a lay monk in Kyoto, Snyder gradually came into contact with a Japanese Beat scene, a group of people calling themselves the Bum Academy, and developed an important friendship with the wandering poet and teacher Nanao Sakaki. He also met, in 1966, Masa Uehara, a graduate student in English at Ochanomizu Women's University. Following Sakaki with several others, Snyder and Masa settled on a sparsely populated volcanic island off the Japanese coast called Suwanose in 1967, where they established the Banyan Ashram, an experiment in communal living. With Sakaki acting as priest, Snyder and Masa were married on 6 August 1967 at 6:30 A.M. on the lip of the active volcano. The Suwanose experience is described in the last essay of *Earth House Hold*, concluding the movement from solitary seeker of *Riprap* to marriage and community. "It is possible at last," he writes, "for Masa and me to imagine a little what the ancient□archaic□mind and life of Japan were. And to see what could be restored to the life today." In December 1968 Snyder, Masa, and their new son, Kai, returned to the United States and set up residence in San Francisco. A second son, Gen, was born in 1969.

In some ways Snyder's least political volume, *The Back Country* covers about a decade of his life. The title can be read as referring to the wilderness, the unconscious, and the so-called backward countries of the East. The book is divided into four sections, "Far West," "Far East," "Kali," and "Back," which correspond roughly to Snyder's experiences in the American West, Japan, India, and to his return to the United States□or, in different terms, a journey from home, to otherness, to chaos and dread, and back to

home on a different plane. As Charles Molesworth suggests in his book on Snyder, "If we realize the fourth section refers, among other things, to a return to America, and if we recognize in 'Kali' that much of the imagery and incidents are drawn from Snyder's visit to India in 1962, then obviously place becomes the central metaphor of the book." Place will increasingly form the basis for cultural vision in Snyder's work, and *The Back Country* as a whole traces his transformation from traveler to dweller, from alienated American to inhabitant of what he will call "Turtle Island."

"Far West" contains several of Snyder's bestknown poems. "A Walk" seems like merely a casual anecdotal narrative of a hike in the woods, but it is significant in the way it concretizes values, encouraging engagement and satisfaction through its simple accumulation of particulars that, as Charles Altieri notes in *Enlarging the Temple* (1978), "require one another if they are to be appreciated fully":

The tent flaps in the warm
Early sun: I've eaten breakfast and I'll
take a walk
To Benson Lake. Packed a lunch,
Goodbye. Hopping on creekbed boulders
Up the rock throat three miles
Piute Creek□
In a steep gorge glacier-slick rattlesnake country
Jump, land by a pool, trout skitter,
The clear sky. Deer tracks.

Details accumulate, jostle, both in the walk and in the poem; they are completed in the arrival "At last," where he eats by the old cookstove of a trail crew. Not merely sensory, the process is in an ordinary and important sense customary: he repeats the basic but sacramental satisfactions of others before him.

The juxtaposition of such images is not merely reportorial; it should be emphasized that Snyder uses techniques he learned jointly from Pound and from Chinese poetics. As far back as his "Lookout's Journal," the opening piece in *Earth House Hold*, he noted a technical strategy based on a principal akin to Zen philosophy:

form□leaving things out at the right spot
ellipse, is emptiness[.]

Snyder uses gaps and spaces expressively to score the reading of the poem and give it a visual rhythm. Silences or gaps also admit the essential emptiness out of which, according to Zen, phenomena arise and into which they return.

"Burning the Small Dead" illustrates various potentials of the strategy:

Burning the small dead
branches
.....
a hundred summers

snowmelt rock and air
hiss in a twisted bough.
sierra granite;
mt. Ritter□
black rock twice as old.
Deneb, Altair
windy fire[.]

Elisions, juxtapositions, spacing□these are as important as the words themselves. While the speaker is apparently burning branches, the poem seems to go on without him, more as a function of the activity itself. The relations configured in the poem, seemingly random, actually articulate an ethos, a view of relations in the world. The star Deneb and Altair and windy fire are set in apposition to one another, inviting the reader to discover identities and differences between them. Deneb and Altair are windy fire at the same time that they obviously have different references. As Altieri notes, "The process of the poem up to the last line is a continual pushing outward in time and space until the contemplative mind reaches the stars Deneb and Altair. . . . The last line then creates a fusion of two forces: it is a return to the limited space of the burning branches, but it is also a continuation beyond the stars to a kind of essence of fire." Phenomena are placed in relations that are local and cosmic, but the basis of their existence is emptiness.

The subsequent three sections of *The Back Country* chart Snyder's emotional and spiritual journey out and his return. In "Far East" Snyder appears as an observer in a strange culture, prompted by dislocation to a degree of self-reflection and retrospective meditation unusual in his poetry. In "Four Poems for Robin" he remembers an important relationship during his early years at Reed College. He concludes the last, "I feel ancient, as though I had / Lived many lives. // And may never now know / If I am a fool / Or have done what my / karma demands." The second section also includes "Six Years," a picture of one phase of his life in Japan reshuffled into a twelve-poem cycle representing a year, in which Snyder takes his predilection for the metonymic list to an extreme. The next section, "Kali," presents images of danger and evil that provoke an uncharacteristic yearning for "the safe place in a blanket burrow." "This Tokyo" represents Snyder at his bleakest. The meditation is opened and, more important, closed by the refrain "Peace war religion revolution / will not help." But "Back" elaborates a more positive vision, notably in "Through the Smoke Hole," a poem based on Hopi Indian cosmology. The kiva, a ceremonial structure, serves as an analogue for Snyder's own vision of a multiworld universe, while the kiva rituals for ensuring the continuity of community through life and death offer structures for Snyder's own movement beyond, if not exclusive of, the vision of "Kali" and toward the real work of building community in his native place.

Regarding Wave, written under the influence of his Japanese anarchist-visionary friends, sets Snyder firmly on a new communitarian course, celebrating a countercultural hero's version of family values. The collection begins with a poem titled "Wave," a meditation that associates the words *wave* and *wife*. The poem is a self-

delighted unfolding of what it means to have a wife: the word, the woman, the "wyfman," the erotic, spiritual adventure that is "veiled; vibrating; vague":

Ah, trembling spreading radiating wyf
racing zebra
catch me and fling me wide
To the dancing grain of things
of my mind!

The last phrase, "dancing grain of things / of my mind," nicely articulates the repetitions Snyder affirms as generated out of *wyf*, the repetition that occurs at once in things and in the things of the mind.

An exuberant formalism, or in Charles Olson's phrase, representation "by the *primitive-abstract*," dominates the book. Many poems elaborate a basic perception of formal and spiritual correspondences between different ontological planes. In "Song of the Tangle" lovers who "sit all folded" formally "repeat" the ancient temple and landscape at the center of which they sit: "Two thigh hills hold us at the fork / round mount center." Both the overgrown archaic temple and crotches of lovers are forms for discovery: "the tangle of the thigh // the brush / through which we push." "Song of the Slip," a poem arranged with every line centered on the page, proposes that the male's lovemaking completes a physical and spiritual harmony: "seedprow // moves in and makes home in the whole." When a son is born the poet stays home and discovers a new center: "From dawn til late at night / making a new world of ourselves / around this life."

Such formal design may seem to displace politics, as if the intuition of correspondence was also an intuition of a sufficient world. Thus, in "Everybody Lying on their Stomachs, Head toward the Candle, Reading, Sleeping, Drawing," as the poet's household forms a circle whose "plank shutter" is "set / Half-open on eternity," the social world is bypassed. But such intuitions of formal and spiritual shapeliness, as partly realized in erotic, family, and natural experience, provide the basis for a militant politics and poetics that envision such harmonies realized in society. *Regarding Wave* lays groundwork for the overtly political verse of later volumes. "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" displays its formal repetition in a revisionary statement of political ideology:

If the capitalists and imperialists
are the exploiters, the masses are the workers.
and the party
is the communist.
If civilization
is the exploiter, the masses is nature.
and the party
is the poets.
If the abstract rational intellect
is the exploiter, the masses is the unconscious.
and the party
is the yogins.

& POWER
comes out of the seed-syllables of mantras.

This is a politics based on a kind of formalist logic the substitution of new elements within the same formula. Mantras themselves are forms more than contents that produce a kind of elementary power through repetition. It is the kind of power that Snyder believes will drive political change.

In 1966 Snyder had bought with Allen Ginsberg one hundred acres of land on the San Juan Ridge near Nevada City in northern California. In 1970, with the help of a crew of ten, he built a home for his family there, naming it Kitkitdizze after some local vegetation. In "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution," an essay first written in 1961 and collected in *Earth House Hold*, Snyder states: "The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both." Kitkitdizze and its region would be Snyder's place to develop a grounded Buddhism. Buddhism's essential perception of emptiness, its aim to look into the nature of things without prejudice, would be put to the service of a local, ecological politics informed by a planetary perspective.

Turtle Island (1974), Snyder's most successful and highly regarded book, won the Pulitzer Prize for 1975. The first complete book written after his permanent return to the United States, it has generated the most criticism of any of his books, partly because it marks a major turn in his career. The volume as a whole sets forth an explicit, sometimes militant ecopolitics, made urgent on one hand by the sense that a virtual war is being waged against the environment and on the other by the vision of sustainable life on Earth. Snyder's use of form changes as well, shifting away from his earlier emphasis on visual presentation to a more straightforward rhetorical mode. The fourth section of the book, called "Plain Talk," consists of four polemical or didactic essays. Instead of letting the images of nature "speak for themselves," Snyder now wishes "to bring a voice from the wilderness, my constituency. I wish to be a spokesman."

The book is prefaced by an opening prose salvo that explains the title and the poet's purpose in using it. Turtle Island is "the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millenia, and reapplied by some of them to 'North America' in recent years." The name must be changed, he argues, so "that we may see ourselves more accurately on this continent of watersheds and life-communities plant zones, physiographic provinces, culture areas: following natural boundaries." Snyder calls for nothing less than the undoing of such confounding territorial markers as state lines and national borders, metonymies for civilization.

The poems, written in the service of what he calls "the real work," are revisionist histories, prophecies, spells, chants, prayers, jeremiads, and visions, as well as personal lyrics. "I Went into the Maverick Bar" describes his infiltration of a conservative establishment during a rest from the road: "My long hair was tucked up under a cap / I'd left the earring in the car." Cowboys, country music, a couple dancing, holding each other "like in High School dances / in the fifties" Snyder acknowledges the innocent

appeal of this world: "The shorthaired joy and roughness□ / America□your stupidity. / I could almost love you again." But out on the road "under the tough old stars" he "came back" to himself, "to the real work, to / 'What is to be done.' " The revolutionary aim of Snyder's work□not just in poetry□is indicated in the citation from Lenin. "Work" in being qualified by the adjective "real" becomes a master term for his cultural project.

American "stupidity" is not "real" because it is complicit in the destruction of the wild. In "The Call of the Wild" the wild is figured as the Native American trickster figure Coyote: amoral, unpredictable, always ungainsayable by human design. But Snyder's coyote is a real animal as well as a figure. The old man who doesn't like coyote "songs" puts out traps; the acidheads from the cities shut him out from their "oil-heated / Geodesic domes, that / Were stuck like warts / In the woods"; the government wages all-out war, "Across Asia first, / And next North America." The coyote is not a spirit that can survive the devastation of the wild. There is "A war against earth. / When it's done there'll be / no place // A Coyote could hide." The envoy reads: "I would like to say / Coyote is forever / Inside you. // But it's not true."

The question posed by this poem is who will inhabit the land: "my sons ask, who are we? / drying apples picked from homestead trees / drying berries, curing meat, / shooting arrows at a bale of straw." Up above "military jets head northeast, roaring every dawn. / my sons ask, who are they?" The poet challenges: "WE SHALL SEE / WHO KNOWS / HOW TO BE." Against the abstract innocence of a country bar and an invasive government, Snyder in "The Bath" celebrates the religious values of his new life of family in nature. Like "Burning the Small Dead," "The Bath" traces a movement from the commonplace phenomena to the apprehension of cosmic significance and back to an immediate reality invested with a larger meaning but in a more elaborate, personal, and ecstatic manner. The bath here is the family soak in the sauna, poet-father-husband-lover, two young sons, and wife-lover-cosmic-mother. The poem depends on juxtaposition, but its principal structural feature is a refrain, "is this our body?," that in its final rendering becomes the declarative "this is our body." Consciously or not, Snyder echoes the Christian mass, which transforms ordinary bread and wine into the body of a dead savior by transforming the daily family bath into an event of religious significance.

Several of Snyder's most perceptive critics have seen the shift in *Turtle Island* as a problematic development. Either the political statements are not justified dramatically, as Altieri argues, or as Robert Kern suggests in *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*, the statements seem like slogans because Snyder's style is made "for the quick, accurate, and reticent notation of metonymic detail that would provide no foothold for the subjective ego or analytic intellect." Michael Davidson cautions that in Snyder's turn toward a more explicit rhetorical intent "the attendant danger is that the poet will move from seer to prophet and begin to instruct where he might present." But this is only to beg the question of whether didacticism in general, and Snyder's didacticism in particular, must be considered intrinsically antipoetic.

Turtle Island, despite the limitations some critics find, can perhaps best be appreciated within its historical context. Snyder wrote the book after the bloom had gone off 1960s

radicalism and in the midst of the first widely perceived ecological crisis, the oil shortage of the early 1970s. His trust in the body, in the goodness of natural impulses, in the ability of poetry to share in that goodness—a poetics of immediate experience—gives way in the 1970s to a more rhetorical style capable of dealing with the disappointments and complexities of new kinds of politics. At the same time, Snyder acknowledges both the temptation of rhetoric and its dangers, because, as he told Ekbert Faas, it may afford only a quick-fix of emotion and ideas "as against the work of doing it structurally. Convincing people with ideas is one system, the other is to change its structural basis."

Many critics have noted Snyder's tendency to elide the pronoun "I" in his poetry. For example, in "Six-Month Song in the Foothills" from *The Back Country* the preparation of tools for the spring is described. Instead of stating, "*I* am sharpening the saws," the "I" is elided, leaving only the participle: "In the cold shed sharpening saw." The speaker is a function of the work, a belief that can be related to Snyder's more general sense of how human subjectivity is derived. In *The Practice of the Wild* he writes:

how could we *be* were it not for this planet that provided
our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and
a livable temperature range between freezing and
boiling—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we
climb and the ground we walk on have given us five
fingers and toes. The 'place' . . . gave us far-seeing
eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile
tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride,
and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind.

Snyder reverses the priority given to human subjectivity in Western philosophy; subjectivity is a derivative of natural processes. As Davidson suggests, the presentation of the natural ground of subjectivity would seem to be the appropriate mode for the poetry. Snyder observes in his contribution to the anthology *Naked Poetry* (1969) that "Each poem grows from an energy-mine-field-dance, and has its own inner grain. To let it grow, to let it speak for itself, is a large part of the work of the poet." A problem arises in *Turtle Island* because political activism in a modern nation-state is not given by nature. Nature lacks rhetorical skills, and this is why Snyder is compelled to assume a "legislative role" with the wild as his constituency. If the poets are the party of nature in a defensive war against civilization, they must marshal their rhetorical powers.

Underlying the rhetoric, however, is a perception both "primitive" and Buddhist that, as he says in "It Pleases," "The world does as it pleases." "Knowing that nothing need be done," he writes in "Plain Talk," "is where we begin to move from." As he suggests in "As for Poets," there is an earth poet, air poet, fire poet, water poet, and space poet, all with their peculiar gifts, but the ultimate place to be what Buddhists call "original mind," which encompasses matter and spirit, is the house without walls on Cold Mountain:

A Mind Poet
Stays in the house.

The house is empty
And it has no walls.
The poem
Is seen from all sides,
Everywhere,
At once.

Such freedom from anxiety□knowing that nothing *need* be done□permits one of Snyder's achievements, a lyric poetry outside the Romantic tradition. Snyder produces lyric speakers who, rather than exercise a lyric crisis of subjectivity in isolation, participate, with good humor and compassion, in collective and political endeavors.

In the nine years that passed between *Turtle Island* and his next major volume of poems, *Axe Handles* (1983), Snyder was building a life on the San Juan Ridge with his wife and sons, an activity honored in the new collection's dedication: "This book is for San Juan Ridge." The didacticism of the previous collection is tempered even as it becomes a central theme of *Axe Handles* "From/For Lew," a poem dedicated to his Reed College friend Lew Welch, exemplifies the content of instruction. Snyder, surprised Welch has not killed himself after all, sees his friend in a dream; but Welch actually is dead and has appeared only to ask Snyder to teach him the wisdom of cycles. Welch's appearance is itself one turn in the cycling of life, death, and knowledge.

In "Axe Handles" Snyder recalls teaching his son Kai how to shape a handle for his hatchet from a broken-off axe handle. The poem becomes a reflection on the transmission of both practical knowledge and the knowledge of knowledge, or culture. Snyder recalls Pound and quotes to his son: "When making an axe handle / the pattern is not far off": "And he sees." Now he recalls also Lu Ji of the fourth century A.D.:□"in making the handle / Of an axe / By cutting wood with an axe / The model is indeed near at hand"□and his Chinese teacher, Shihsiang, who translated it years ago:

And I see: Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

Two poems in the collection especially speak to the poles of Snyder's career, wandering and dwelling. "True Night," Robert Schultz and David Wyatt suggest in "Gary Snyder and the Curve of Return" from *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*, articulates "the tension between the urge to be out and away and the need to settle and stay." Awakened from sleep to chase away raccoons from the kitchen, Snyder is arrested by the moment of stillness and emptiness: "I am all alive to the night. / Bare foot shaping on gravel / Stick in the hand forever." "Fifty years old," he reflects sardonically, "I still spend my time / Screwing nuts down on bolts." But he is pulled back, in Wyatt's words, by "a contrary motion," realizing that "One cannot stay too long awake / In this dark." Life is back with his family, "the waking that comes / Every day // With the dawn." The final poem, "For

All," elaborates that insight as a statement of faith and purpose. Snyder is not primarily an ironic writer, but the light irony in this version of the pledge of allegiance to the American flag provides enough tension to make the poem more than a political program. It moves from exclamation, "ah to be alive"□the mind's amazement□to illustration through metonymic description of fording a stream. This delighted kinetic experience of contiguity□ not alienation, not fusion□opens to the single line, "I pledge allegiance":

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

A broadside of "for all" is posted on one wall of the North Columbia Cultural Center on San Juan Ridge.

In the spring of 1986 Snyder became a faculty member at the University of California at Davis, two hours' drive from his home. He has taught creative writing, literature, and wilderness thought and has been actively involved in bringing writers to the campus and in developing a program in nature and culture. This position freed him from the arduous poetry-reading circuit and gave him another area of activity, a broad scholarly community, and the encouragement to produce *Practice of the Wild*, a sustained work of prose distinct from his previous collections of occasional essays and talks. In 1991 Snyder's many friends and colleagues contributed to *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*, a book honoring the poet's sixtieth birthday. They testify to Snyder's worth as a teacher of Zen and as a model of pragmatism, courtesy, good sense, and leadership. He is praised for making his home a center for the recreative life of the San Juan community and for his generosity and honesty.

Although he has not produced a major volume of poetry since *Axe Handles*, Snyder in the fifteenpoem final section of *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (1992), titled "No Nature," continues his "real work." Snyder seems to be looking back over his career in such poems as "On Climbing the Sierra Matterhorn Again after Thirty-One Years":

Range after range of mountains
Year after year after year.
I am still in love.

"The cultural revolution is over," he says in "Building," a poem dedicated to his neighbors. But "this dance with Matter / Goes on: our buildings are solid, to live, to teach, to sit, / To sit, to know for sure the sound of a bell□/ This is history. This is outside history." Snyder again articulates a Buddhist perception: nothing need be done, yet it will be done:

Buildings are built in the moment,
they are constantly wet from the pool
that renews all things
naked and gleaming.

The last poem of the volume, "Ripples on the Surface," may reflect Snyder's exposure to poststructuralist thought at Davis, showing the latest inflection of Snyder's thinking on the relations between nature and culture:

"Ripples on the surface of the water□
were silver salmon passing under□different
from the ripples caused by breezes"

Snyder asserts that nature has a signifying practice; because the ripples signify, Snyder concludes: "□ Nature not a book, but a *performance*, a / high old culture." Culture is not a category of society only, not a structure set off from the wild: there is in a sense "No nature," only "Both together, one big empty house"□Cold Mountain.

Recent developments in cultural studies have made possible a less literary assessment of Snyder's work. Tim Dean's *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious: Inhabiting the Ground* (1991) is the most ambitious work on Snyder to date, both in the critical, cultural, and theoretical materials it brings to a reading of a small selection of representative poems and in the claims it makes, not so much for Snyder's greatness as a poet but for his important role in the construction of American culture in the late twentieth century. For Dean, American culture is defined both by the central role of the land in its development and by the repression of its real relation to that land, which is one of exploitation. Snyder is significant because his principal address as poet and thinker is to that very relation, and his principal goal as cultural worker is the reinhabitation of the ground according to a different relation. His work reminds us over and over, as in *The Practice of the Wild*, that "It is not enough just to 'love nature' or to want to 'be in harmony with Gaia.'" In his 1990 interview with David Robertson, Snyder indicated that his next project would be the completion of his long poem begun in the late 1950s, "Mountains and Rivers without End."

Source: Kevin McGuirk, "Gary Snyder," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 165, *American Poets Since World War II, Fourth Series*, edited by Joseph Conte, Gale Research, 1996, pp. 254-66.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Schultz and Wyatt summarize Snyder's early work and provide indepth coverage of Axe Handles*, the collection that contains "True Night."*

Published when he was 29, Snyder's first book . . . empties the mind of the "damned memories" that clog it in an ascesis that marks the beginning of his quest. In *Riprap* (1959) he turns from America toward the East and begins the motion out and away that will preoccupy him for 15 years. *Myths & Texts* (1960) promotes Snyder's emerging vision of process in a dialectical structure which resolves that all form is a momentary stay, "stresses that come into being each instant." In a world where "It's all falling or burning" the experience of place is only a fiction, and there can be therefore nothing to return to. *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1965-) will contain 25 sections and is as yet unfinished. This may prove the major work of Snyder's career, though, as in Pound's *Cantos,* the poet can seem more committed to the theory than the poetry of this poem. The theory holds, in Snyder's words, that "every poem in *Mountains and Rivers* takes a different form and has a different strategy." A poem built upon the impulse of turning away from its own realized structures, *Mountain and Rivers* would seem a work about journeys, about "Passing / through." Its fascination however with what Snyder has called the "focal image" and with a realm above the Blue Sky also reaches toward permanence. These growing tensions as well as the poem's quality as a running rumination on all that Snyder holds dear place it at this point beyond any developmental model of Snyder's career.

The Back Country (1968) is in this argument the pivotal book, the one openly engaged with Snyder's own history of turning. What begins as a reprise of *Riprap*□in "Far West" Snyder amasses his reasons for moving and forgetting□proceeds by discovering an opposing impulse to return and remember. A poem like "Dodger Point Lookout" bears comparison to "Tintern Abbey" in its acceptance of meaning as a function of elapsed time. The return of the poet to a beloved spot five years later "brings it all back," and he admits that the conserving power of memory is what keeps him "sane."

Regarding Wave (1970) shores up the position gained in *The Back Country* by valorizing a new and conserving pattern□the wave□capable of storing and releasing the energy which Snyder had earlier discovered in the stream. A book about "What's Meant by Here." *Turtle Island* (1974) register Snyder's emerging commitment to a structure that stays in place. Homesteading replaces hitchhiking as the privileged human activity as Snyder's act of settlement in California expands into a sense of stewardship over the entire planet.

This rapid summary brings us back to *Axe Handles,* Snyder's first book of poems in nearly a decade and one in which he celebrates the whim and wisdom of middle age. In *Axe Handles* Snyder begins with work around the house and ends with journeys. Travel is now seen as the venturing out from a hearth, and thus the controlling metaphors . . . are of structures that return or contain.

Axe Handles is divided into three parts, "Loops," "Little Songs for Gaia," and finally "Nets," which itself contains four sections. At first glance, the book may seem too intricate or arbitrary in its structure, but with further reading sections and subsections reveal important groupings of Snyder's current concerns. The book follows the poet's movement of mind as he attempts to discover a coherence among commitments that are personal, familial, and cultural in scope.

"True Night," the book's central poem and the concluding poem of the first section, most succinctly dramatizes the choice Snyder has made in favor of returning and settling. But the poems which surround it show the full content of the poet's choice. *Axe Handles* is a declaration of affiliations to an ideal of "home," an ideal that has grown in Snyder's imagination to include the full range of a life's attachments, from the most personal and local to the most public and distant. At the personal level, Snyder takes firm possession of his own biography, noting memories which reveal patterns of self-definition ("Look Back," "Soy Sauce," "Delicate Criss-crossing Beetle Trails Left in the Sand"). He writes of family and community with ideals of mutual support and teaching ("Changing Diapers," "Painting the North San Juan School"). He writes about the possibilities and limitations of government ("Talking Late with the Governor about the Budget"). He returns again and again to the mooring certainties of hard physical labor ("Working on the '58 Willys Pickup," "Getting in the Wood"). And, as ever, he writes with great attention to a natural order seen through the particularities of his home region (the book is dedicated "To San Juan Ridge").

Memory, family, community, teaching, government, and natural process: the subjects of *Axe Handles* necessarily involve Snyder in time and recurrence. The poet who began by relishing the obliterating sense of timelessness as he peered down alone through miles of air from Sourdough Lookout now gives special emphasis to the loops of cultural transmission, and *Axe Handles* begins with a coincidence which dramatizes for Snyder the "craft of culture." His son has asked for a hatchet handle, and while carving it with an axe Snyder remembers with a shock of recognition the Chinese phrase, "When making an axe handle the pattern is not far off." The lesson, first read in Ezra Pound and then studied again under Snyder's Japanese teacher, Chen, is now lived by the poet, and he writes:

. . . I see: Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

The book's second poem reinforces the theme, as the spirit of Lew Welch returns from the dead to tell Snyder: " . . . teach the children about the cycles. / The life cycles. All the other cycles. / That's what it's all about, and it's all forgot." And indeed, subsequent poems deal with integrities created by recurrence: the water cycle; the life cycle of a Douglas fir; loops of personal memory that illuminate present moments; and a

pilgrimage of return to Japan to renew ties with Masa's family and, incidentally, to crisscross the path of Snyder's own earlier travels. . . .

Imbued with a sense of nature's rigor, Snyder has chosen to live apart from what he takes to be the extravagance of his contemporaries. He frets comically about the $3.50 worth of kerosene required to soak his fence posts and wonders at the amount of fuel burned in displays of power by air defense jets. His alarm at our civilization's utter dependence upon a diminishing oil supply, in fact, arises in no fewer than five poems, making it one of the book's most insistent concerns. In "Alaska" he describes a trip to the oil pipeline, where he read the question, "Where will it all end?" spray-painted on the elevated tube. Later, dozing with his colleagues in a small plane, he suddenly noticed out the window "the mountains / Soaring higher yet, and quite awake."

The eerie presence of those mountains, immense and watchful, looms for Snyder as a premonition of inevitable retribution. According to the poet's sense of natural law, unnatural acts call forward inevitable consequences, and in several poems Snyder sounds a note of judgment. In "Money Goes Upstream," he is in a lecture hall, daydreaming about greed and corruption. Money, he thinks, is "an odd force . . . in the world / *Not* a power / That seeks to own the source." It behaves unnaturally "It dazzles and it slips us by. / It swims upstream." Therefore, those who place it too near the center of their lives become unmoored, possessed. Against this insidious influence Snyder poses his own ability to summon the corrective presence of nature:

I can smell the grass, feel the stones with bare feet
though I sit here shod and clothed
with all the people. That's my power.

This power is two-fold: Snyder's firsthand knowledge of nature and its sufficiencies inoculates him from avarice, and his ability to summon what is not present keeps him ever close to the natural law from which he borrows his authority.

Snyder could hardly have traveled farther from his early absorption with moments of pure vision or sensation to the instinct for teaching and judgment so apparent in *Axe Handles.* The former experience is solitary and held out of time by its novelty and intensity, while "passing on" is communal and temporal, yet the poet still holds that our most fundamental knowledge is discovered in moments of experience which stand out of time. And, as if to reaffirm this fact, Snyder includes at the center of *Axe Handles* a sequence of lyrics which presents a gallery of such moments.

"Little Songs for Gaia," issued in an earlier version as a Copper Canyon Press chapbook (1979), is addressed to the earth goddess of Greek mythology. In it Snyder descends from the more general point of view which allows him to be discursive elsewhere in the book to write here with an unmixed particularity. The ecological point of view expressed in *Axe Handles* has grown out of a thousand individual experience, and here Snyder reestablishes contact, zooming down to the thing, itself:

Red soil□blue sky□white cloud□grainy granite,
and
Twenty thousand mountain miles of manzanita.
Some beautiful tiny manzanita
I saw a single, perfect, lovely,
manzanita
Ha.

Snyder, like Antaeus, renews his strength by touching ground, and that is what he does in this middle section, absorbed in description of his home region and his daily domestic life.

Elsewhere in the book readers may sometimes balk at Snyder's prose-like rhythms, which often conform only to the poet's clipped, trochaic manner of speech. But "Little Songs for Gaia" features some of the most accomplished lyric writing of Snyder's career whether he is presenting a dream of corn goddesses or a deer hit by a car:

Dead doe lying in the rain
on the shoulder
in the gravel
I see your stiff leg
in the headlights
by the roadside
Dead doe lying in the rain

The circularity of this brief lyric fixes our attention, beginning and end, on the unfortunate deer, with the assonance of the spondee, "Dead doe," hammering home the image. In between, the four prepositional phrases are exactly parallel in rhythm, relentlessly locating the dead animal. And in between them, the kernel sentence, "I see your stiff leg," particularizes the doe efficiently and with poignance.

Elsewhere, Snyder even uses end rhyme to good effect:

Log trucks go by at four in the morning
as we roll in our sleeping bags
dreaming of health.
The log trucks remind us,
as we think, dream and play
Of the world that is carried away.

The surprise of the closural rhyme, which suddenly links the family's dreams and play with eventual loss, is largely responsible for the power of this brief lyric. Contributing to the effect, three consecutive anapests speed the final line, creating a sense of the poet's world quickly slipping away.

"Little Songs for Gaia" is made of glimpses□ heightened moments of perception or feeling communicating an intimacy of contract with things which spices and sustains the life of the poet. Everywhere in this section Snyder is intent upon the particular and

absorbed in the moment, attending to everything as to the flickers' call: "THIS! / THIS! / THIS! / in the cool pine breeze."

Snyder moves back from knowing to doing in the book's final section, "Nets," in which each of the four clusters of poems forms a rather loosely organized Poundian "ideogram." Taken together, these four clusters portray the "nets" of contemplation and activity in which Snyder is currently enmeshed.

The first, a bridge from the Gaia sequence, presents Snyder active and reverent in a natural world that flashes glimpses of deity. Walking a Yellowstone meadow, for instance, he observes its graceful creatures and ambiguously records the perception of a goddess-like presence:

And I saw: the turn of the head, the glance of the
eye, each gesture, each lift and stamp
Of your high-arched feet.

Part II of "Nets" probes the possibilities and shortcomings of government. Snyder is skeptical (he seems to long for a more expansive governmental perspective when he notes that "The great pines on the Capitol grounds [in Sacramento] / Are less than a century old"), but he is willing to participate, and former California governor Jerry Brown, who appointed Snyder to the state Arts Council, is a sympathetic character in the book. Adding another piece of the cultural puzzle, part III juxtaposes "civilization" with more primitive ways of life, marking chiefly their differing relationships to the ecosystems which support them. . . .

The allegiances pledged in *Axe Handles* are many□to family, community, culture, and planet. And to make such pledges Snyder has turned considerably from his earlier conception of the world as "all change, in thoughts, / As well as things" ("Riprap"). Within this earlier view, the poet's only recourse was to attempt to fix in words moments plucked out of the careering flux.

In *Axe Handles* there are many heightened moments seized out of time by language, but these are now seen to take their place within a broader continuity. Snyder still prizes moments when the self loses itself entirely in sensation, and a poem like "Getting in the Wood" shows how that early experience of transcendence survives into its new context. This passage in mid-poem contains no subject because the self is utterly absorbed in its work:

The lean and heave on the peavey
that breaks free the last of a bucked
three-foot round,
it lies flat on smashed oaklings□

Departing from the usual subject-predicate structure, Snyder's noun phrase presents only the effort itself and the object worked upon, with internal rhyme and skillfully managed rhythms communicating the strain of the job. The poet is happily lost in what he elsewhere calls the "relentless clarity at the heart of work," an experience which is

for Snyder virtually a kind of meditation. At peace in his work, his attention is enthralled by "Wedge and sledge, peavey and maul, / little axe, canteen, piggy-back can / of saw-mix gas and oil for the chain, / knapsack of files and goggles and rags."

Snyder could be writing about his early logging days in a poem like this, which captures in words the grit and strain of sensation. But the distance he has traveled since those early days is revealed in the final stanza, in which the task at hand is shown to be a collective one, and in which Snyder emphasizes the continuities of family and community which the work helps to develop:

the young men throw splits on the piles
bodies hardening, learning the pace
and the smell of tools from this delve
in the winter
death-topple of elderly oak.

This is a community task, with the young men learning and hardening to the jobs they will inherit when their elders pass, like the toppled oak. Here is the sense of continuity and cultural transmission which Snyder has acquired as a husband, father, and homesteader, a sense which has changed him over the course of his career from *dharma* hitchhiker to domestic visionary.

Source: Robert Schultz and David Wyatt, "Gary Snyder and the Curve of Return," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Autumn 1986, pp. 681-94.

Topics for Further Study

Research Zen Buddhism and describe its origins and main tenets. How would you describe the Zen Buddhist method and purpose of meditating? What is a koan?

Research shamanism in the Native American tradition. What is a shaman? What functions does a shaman perform? What is the shaman's place in traditional Native American culture, or in other cultures?

Rewrite the first part of "True Night" from the point of view of the raccoons. Try to convey how they would experience the situation. What might they see, hear, touch, smell, taste, and sense?

As humans build communities on ever-expanding areas of land, the natural habitats of wildlife are being displaced or altered. What is the impact of the presence of wildlife on property and residents? In what areas of the United States is the problem most acute? What can be done to alleviate the problem? Can humans and wildlife co-exist?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Zen Buddhism has a hundred-year history in the United States. There are many Zen centers in cities throughout the nation. Many people are attracted to Zen through the work of Snyder, who first became interested in Zen in the 1950s.

Today: Zen Buddhism and other branches of Buddhism continue to grow steadily in the United States. The branch that has recently attracted most attention is Tibetan Buddhism. Much of this has been due to the popularity of the Dalai Lama and the publicity given to the cause of Tibet in its conflict with China by Hollywood personalities like Richard Gere, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Seagal.

1980s: In *Axe Handles*, Snyder continues to advocate responsibility to a sense of community and shared culture. He admires cultures that consist of small, self-governing communities.

Today: As *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), by Robert Putnam, demonstrates, Americans are becoming more and more isolated and disengaged from civic life. This is indicated by measures including how many times the average American votes, volunteers, goes to church, attends a club or union meeting, signs a community petition, or chats with a stranger.

1980s: After a series of legislative successes in the 1970s that established regulations governing clean air and water, the environmentalist movement is on the defensive. The Reagan administration tends to favor business interests over environmental concerns.

Today: The environmentalist movement is in a crisis. The Bush administration pursues a probusiness agenda and makes substantial efforts to ease environmental regulations. In 2001, the Bush energy plan emphasizes oil exploration and construction of coal and nuclear power plants. Energy conservation and the development of renewable energy receive little attention.

What Do I Read Next?

Buddhist teacher and community leader Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (1991), explains through stories, anecdotes, and meditations how spirituality can be lived in each moment of the day, in whatever circumstances a person finds oneself. He also provides some breathing exercises to facilitate spiritual awareness and peace of mind.

The Gary Snyder Reader (1999), with an introduction by Jim Dodge, includes essays, interviews, and poetry culled from a creative life that has spanned over forty years. It serves as an excellent introduction to the range of Snyder's poetry as well as to his intellectual, social and political concerns.

Howl and Other Poems (1956), by Allen Ginsberg, with an introduction by William Carlos Williams, contains the famous poem "Howl." This was first read by Ginsberg in a historic poetry reading in 1955 in San Francisco, in which Snyder also participated. Ginsberg went on to become a leading figure of the Beat Generation and a very influential personality in the radical social movements of the 1960s.

Robert Bly's *Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems* (2000) is a collection of old and new poems by one of America's leading poets. Bly has written appreciatively about Snyder's poetry, and the range of his own work is extremely wide. Known also as the founder of the men's movement, Bly shares with Snyder an interest in spirituality, which he approaches from a mythic and psychological point of view.

The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth (2002), edited by Sam Hamill and Bradford Morrow, contains *The Signature of All Things*, which had a major influence on Snyder's early poetry and which Robert Bly has called one of the greatest of all American books. Rexroth, who died in 1982, is noted for his poems of nature, travel, political protest, and love. Like Snyder's poetry, *The Signature of All Things* shows a keen sense of how the material world is interpenetrated by consciousness and spirit.

Further Study

Halper, Jon, ed., *Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life*, Sierra Club Books, 1991.

This book was published in honor of Snyder's sixtieth birthday; it is a collection of affectionate and appreciative essays written by Snyder's friends and colleagues. It covers varying aspects of Snyder's life and work.

Molesworth, Charles, *Gary Snyder's Vision: Poetry and the Real Work*, University of Missouri Press, 1983.

This scholarly study, hampered by the lack of an index, emphasizes Snyder's political concerns, showing how he responds to and corrects the values of multinational capitalism. It was published before *Axe Handles* and so includes no discussion of that volume.

Snyder, Gary, *The Practice of the Wild*, North Point Press, 1990.

This is a collection of nine essays that describe Snyder's many journeys into nature, both literal and metaphorical, and his thoughts on the interaction of nature and culture.

Steuding, Bob, *Gary Snyder*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 274, Twayne Publishers, 1976.

This is an excellent introduction to Snyder's poetry. It covers his major works up to and including *Turtle Island* and contains a useful annotated bibliography.

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Wordsworth, William, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads*, edited by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, Methuen, 1971, pp. 113-18.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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