

## The Poetic Art and Vision of Gary Snyder: An Appraisal

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson  
School of English & Foreign Languages & School of Indian Languages,  
Department of English & Comparative Literature  
Madurai Kamaraj University,  
Madurai - 625 021. (T.N). India.

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper throws light on Snyder's poetic career which involves an inward journey into the depths of life by presenting ordinary world into an extra ordinary world in an extremely charming manner. His poetic endeavour spontaneously stems from bodily work and poetic conception of snyder his in discovering a perfect identity between language and reality by thoroughly examining an integral relation between his actual experience and his poetic expression moreover, his way of living influences his poetic endeavour and his poetic art.*

**Key Words:** poetic art and vision.

Gary Snyder, holding a commendable place in the field of contemporary American Poetry, was born on 8<sup>th</sup> may 1930 in San Francisco, California and his rich poetic outlook is so cosmic and universal that his poetry lends itself to a profound concern with the present predicament of mankind. Having received school education from Lincoln High School at Portland, Oregon, he graduated from Reed College, Portland in literature and anthropology. Even during his college days, he showed interest in writing poems and got them published in the student publication **Janus and Gurgle**. "These early poems, as Bob Steuding has put it, published in the period 1950-51, were written about nature, classmates and mountaineering" (P18). Poems like 'A Poem' 'Song' 'Autumn Equinox' 'Senecure for the P. Whalen', 'For George Leigh Mallory/ missing on Everest', 'By the North Gate', Wind Blows full of sand were his first exertions into print. Even though they were found to be immature efforts, they out and out indicated his growing awareness of a poetic vocation.

Snyder's creative mission started with the examination of primitive forms of life. The

poetic urge in him remained insatiable. This is the reason which explains his interest in the literary works of such writers as Thoreau, Whitman, D.H. Lawrence and T.S.Eliot. His revolutionary career got visualized rather evidently in his acceptance of Zen Buddhism as a valuable resource for the integration of human consciousness. Many writers in the West very rarely go beyond their limited cultural preconception but Snyder takes shelter in the unified world of all forms of life and activity, for to remain open to one dimension of life to stay insensitive to other dimensions is a form of self-imposed poverty. According to Snyder, the modern life is covered with excessive rational sophistication. Life lived at a rational level does not reveal the inadequacy of reason to explore all levels of life. Many events of life can be understood only by the man who is filled with an imaginative mode of consciousness. While the depth of life is hidden by many superficial elements, Snyder's poetic career involves an inward journey into the depths of life.

The greatest adventure of Snyder lies in his readiness to shed the monotheistic judeo-Christian assumptions and the equally

great fact is his mental preparedness to keep his soul open to the rich dimensions of Eastern wisdom. His view of life rises to the heights of the great Bhagavad Gita. His poetic ideal of life admits the simultaneous juxtaposition of activism and quietism, which are normally two opposed values in the framework of the Western tradition. The slogan of the Bhagavad Gita, "Be in the world, but be not of the world" must be kept in our mind whenever we study Snyder's interest in nature for he had reverence for all forms of life and he believed that every aspect of life requires to be studied with sacramental attention and joy.

The poems collected in **Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems** do portray Snyder's experience of joy and youthful rugged adventures. Nature presented a poised passivity to Romantic poets. But to Snyder, it presented a poise of life bubbling with activity. The Greek and the Christian culture involved dualism between thought of God and the consciousness of the world. Snyder went beyond this division and believed in the unity of all forms of life. It is this fact that throws light on his interest in Zen Buddhism and other forms of Eastern wisdom. His writings also gain an element of completeness and wholeness essentially in the light of this fact. A close reading of his poetry makes one understand that the inner spirit of Gary Snyder was tending towards the insights of Indian sensibility and wisdom. Activity and silence more as two closely related virtues in the poetic life scheme of Snyder. He knows that the balance between the two opposed values can be kept only by a man of comprehensive human consciousness of which he is in healthy possession.

Like all Romantic poets, Snyder is a lover of Mother Earth. His attachment to the soil is born out of his longing for a meaningful relation to it. 'Earth' is regarded by him as a 'Mother'. He attributes human dimension to

the earth and goes one step further in endorsing it with femininity. When Snyder says, he pledges allegiance to the soil, he means that without the realization of the link between man and earth, there is no possibility for a higher understanding of life. In his opinion, man's sensitivity is rooted in nature and is closely related to the soil. Man is significantly aware of things when he deeply communes with Earth, soil, and other related things. These lines quoted from the poem "For All" make this point clear:

"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  
interpretation for all (Axe Handles  
113)

Snyder went very deep into the roots of all ancient civilization and discovered that a rich vision of life was expressed whenever the need for a link between man and nature was felt. According to him, human sensibility grows only in relation to one's understanding of Nature and his capacity for communion with it. The materialistic civilization broke this link between man and nature and made man an independent being. This led to a total emptiness in life and human sensibility remained undeveloped.

Nature bustles with variety and multiplicity but at the same time, there is some force that connects all these multifarious things. Nature at one ecosystem, according to Snyder, in which diversity and unity get nicely balanced. The word 'ecosystem' indicates for him a special environmental awareness which created an urge in man to protect the life and purity of all things. His aesthetic perception shows that all things shine with beauty and splendour. His Zen Buddhist perception indicates that all things are filled with the Buddha nature. His eco-mystical consciousness creates a necessity to treat all

things must be loved and revered. This seems to be the rich poetic vision of Snyder. In the poem "Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution" in **The Regarding Wave**, the labour power of man is shown to be exploited by the capitalist. Marx created a big revolution by pointing out this truth. Snyder surpasses Marx in indicating the greatest type of exploitation which remains unobserved by many people. This is brought out in a telling manner here in the following lines.

Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes,

Animals, trees, water, air, grasses (RW 39)

When Marx talked about the theme of exploitation, he never made reference to animals, trees, water, air and grasses which are ruthlessly exploited by man for their selfish purpose. Marx was bothered about man's unkindness to another man. Snyder is very much concerned with man's unkindness to animals and trees. It is clear from these lines that no vision of life is complete without an ecological awareness. Man can represent another man but an animal cannot represent another animal for the purpose of protecting its welfare. A compassionate man is necessary to speak on behalf of animals and trees and represent their necessity to live in a better condition with the warmth and the tenderness and the loving care of other man. In this respect, Snyder is an ultra modern communist in giving an ecological base to his poetic vision.

In the American Transcendentalism, the Americanness of the American civilization became a vital concept with poets like Emerson and Whitman. In ancient days subject matter of poetry was chosen from remote antiquity. This convention was broken and Snyder also applied this transcendentalist

principle in his formation of poetry. The entire American life is poetic according to Snyder also for example, the entire American west gripped the mind of Snyder. He went outside and embraced other cultural traditions in order to make the old American traditions meaningful and poetically significant. The participants in the poetic world of Snyder are not Jupiter, Prometheus, Hercules. On the other hand, the sky, clouds, trees, animals, birds, leaves, rocks happen to be active participants in the poetic cosmos of Snyder. Even ordinary things are presented with his poetic skill in an extremely charming manner.

Then, there is the question of the subject-object dualism, in materialistic civilization, there is always a rift between subject and object and object is overestimated at the cost of the subject. This leads to a certain imbalance in the human perception. The relation between man and nature is was longer there due to this rift. Snyder felt the dangerousness of this trend and pleaded for the synthesis of man and nature. The poet becomes one with nature and the reader becomes one with the poet. The poet goes into a deep trance and in this trance, man lives in total communion with nature Human nature becomes gentle, lovable, calm on account of this poetic communion. All objects of nature carry a unified reality of their own. Hopkins called it 'inscape' and the critic calls it the 'isness' of the object, i.e. every living thing contains a distinct reality of its own. The capacity of Snyder to enter into the object of nature is something very striking. Every object is felt and grasped by him because of his penetrating poetic consciousness. He is intensely aware of the existence of all things which contain deep forms of life. A good example can be cited from Snyder's collection of poems **The Back Country**. The poem "Home from Sierra" collect in **The Back Country** represents certain important quality

in the poetic cosmos of Snyder. The sense of belonging to the native culture, intense interest in the objects of nature, subject-object union and a certain poetic awareness of the reality of all forms of life seen in objects get uniformly embodied in this poem, to attest to the fact that his poetic vision is different from that of even the Romantic poets in terms of treatment of subject-object union and reverence for even small, ordinary objects of nature.

In the first stanza, 'night star' and 'dawn' are the poetic participants creating a new awareness for the poet. The next stanza creates a feeling of touch and solidarity. The mush pot in the lake is washed. This is a significant activity for Snyder. He lives in tune with the rhythm of nature. 'Frost on the horse' conveys a feeling of oneness and solidarity. All things live in union with one another. 'All morning walking to the car' – this line is poetically impressive. There is no earth shaking activity taking place but this casual act of walking is so simple that it induces in the poet a mood of total relaxation. D.H.Lawrence once pointed out that man must recover his original freedom from where he lived. The last stanza refers to the Mexicans going on flat cars in a hot plain. Nothing is unimportant for Snyder. Everything reveals a particular reality of its own. One must be in the right state to perceive it. Phrases like 'cool fog' 'Smell of Strawmats' and 'Cup of green tea' embody very normal events and items of life. There is a certain dignity in recalling to one's mind the normal things of life. Snyder does it with great poetic spirit in this particular poem.

The poem "Foxtail Pine" presents a vivid description of a tree with its barks and branches. Its leaves are needles like a fox's brush Snyder's power of observation is praiseworthy. But there are other things which are very important in the poetic process of Snyder. A familiar object is a source of

attraction for him and at the same time what is odd does engage the mind of Snyder. The Zen Buddhist training must have enabled him to show lively interest in things that appear odd and strange. The following lines are quoted here in order to make this point clear:

a sort of tree its leaves are needles  
like a fox's brush (I call him fox  
because he looks that way)  
and call him this other thing a foxtail  
pine. (RW 17)

Snyder perceives a perfect correspondence between the needle-shaped leaves and the foxtail. He looks at this phenomenon with a sense of wonder. The poem, therefore, is noted for three important things;

- i. His power of observation is accompanied by a forceful poetic description.
- ii. The picture of needle-shaped leaves looking like a foxtail is a kind of conceit which amounts to a kind of simple comparison. The entire poetic pen-picture gains concreteness, solidity and directness.
- iii. Strangeness is an important aspect of romanticism. Snyder is attracted by strange and unfamiliar things.

According to Snyder, poetry requires intelligent organisation. This is comparable to masonry. What Snyder means by this is not simply a kind of choosing a word and placing them in simple technical order. What he has in his mind is that some intuitive sense must guide the choice and placement of words. A well-known example can be cited from the poem "Riprap";

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks  
Placed solidly, 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. (P30)

Where the imaginative sense is very rich, there is always the possibility of inward order and intuitive rhythm. This is seen in the work of placing granite stones in order and proper arrangement. Snyder does not make any disconnection between work and the way of life. That is why he compares poetic craft to masonry. Words are kept in mind like rocks. Then these words are given a solid embodiment in space and time. So poetic craft of Snyder combines two things, intuitive sensibility and a kind of rhythmic analytical skill. The different poetic impulses spring up from his first hand experience in doing such manual jobs as carpentry, gardening, logging, firewood cutting, trucking etc., Snyder himself says as proof of evidence here as:

“In part – the major environmental influence is the work at hand. I feel very close to the rhythms of work and the rhythms of whatever my work is, which is sometimes – I do a lot of work with my hands. Sometimes it’s Carpentry, Sometimes it’s gardening, Sometimes it’s logging, Sometimes it’s firewood cutting, Sometimes it’s trucking, Sometimes it’s working on cars – a lot of variety ---” (Packard 277)

In the words of Ronal Hayman, “all Snyder’s poems have the air of impromptu living” (P78). What he means here is that all the poems of Snyder spring from direct experience and immediate understanding of things in terms of hard labour for living. For Snyder, ‘living with working’ becomes a primary act and ‘writing’ becomes a secondary endeavour. There is an integral relation between physical experience and poetic expression. His poetic endeavour spontaneously stems from bodily work. The following passage attests to this point:

“Squatting a day in the sun one hand turning the steel drill one, swinging the four pound singlejack hammer down Three inches an hour granite bullhump boulder square in the trail above the cliffs of piute mountain Waver, Sweat trickles down my back Why does this day keep coming into mind ? a job in the rock hills aching arms the muletraacks arching blinding sky, non-sleep under Snake-scale juniper limbs” (Fire in the Hole, BC 12)

The poet becomes poetic in his humble description of his casual and routine work on a day in the sun one hand is turning the stelldrill while the other is swinging the singlejack hammer. His work amidst the mountains and rocks is tiresome but the work is done in such a way that both his body and sensibility are equally engaged and this thus proves to be a source of enthusiasm and poetic inspiration to the poet. Snyder takes pride in hard labour and he does not wish to detach poetic activity from it. He really feels and writes in glory of the fruit of hard labour. As Bob Steuding has put it, “one can clearly see in his early poems the relationship in Snyder’s mind between poetry and craft” (P26). In brief, it may be said that Snyder’s poetry is rooted in work experience, His very first poetic creation Riprap may be taken as an example to show his poetic craft to be identical with physical labour of his own approach to poetry, Snyder himself observes:

“I’ve recently come to realize that the rhythms of my poems follow the rhythm of the physical work. I am doing and the life I’m leading at any given time – which makes the music in my head, which creates the line ...Riprap, is really a class of poems which I wrote under the geology of the Sierra Nevada and the trail-crew

work of picking up and placing  
stones in tight cabbie patterns on hard  
slab...." (Allen 420)

Snyder treats as 'a living and growing organization'. It draws its strength from several regions. The history of poetry shows that intuition, reason, passion, senses have more or less engaged the life of the poets. He believes that poetry is a deep phenomena which is essentially intuitive in nature and intellectual and rational in its mode of organisation. As Snyder has a very comprehensive background nourished by Zen Buddhism, Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, he makes his poetic conception a very rich endeavour quite free from affectation and falsity. He has traced the evolution of poetry and indicated its nature in the poem, "As For Poets":

The first Water poet  
Stayed down six years  
He was covered with seaweed  
The life in his poem  
Left millions of tiny  
Different tracks  
Crisis-crossing through the mud

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A mind Poet  
Stays in the house  
The house is empty  
And it has no walls  
The poem  
is seen from all sides  
Every where  
At once" (Turtle Island 87)

Snyder says that the poets who have their base on earth need know inspiration. The Aire poets move on a new plane of reality which enables them to compose poems with great facility. The fire poets burn with joy and passion and write under inspirational ecstasy. The mind poet stays in the house. The irony is that the house is empty. Here 'emptiness' means 'abstraction'. A mind poet does not

place himself in a concrete background of nature. On the other hand, he lives in a world of void. So, poetry, according to Snyder, does not arise from mind. It springs from a deeper source animated by soul which kindles imagination and emotions of joy coupled with enthusiasm. Snyder concludes that a real poem is seen from all sides. This means that Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Mind are all helping agents in the making of a good poem. All the elements go into the making of a good poem. One thing becomes clear that mind does not enjoy predominant impulse in the poetic concept of Snyder. Intuition is primary and mind is secondary. In other words, a good poem has its background embodied in the realm of imagination and intuition.

One important matter in the poetic conception of Snyder lies in discovering a perfect identity between language and reality. The main endeavour is to make language identical with reality. Language requires to be handled very flexibly and equally in an innovative way. The poem "No Matter, Never Mind" shows the fundamental ground of affinity between language and reality:

The Father is the void  
The wife Waves  
Their child is matter  
Matter makes it with his mother  
And their child is Life, a daughter.  
The daughter is the Great Mother  
Who, with her father/brother Matter  
as her Lover Gives birth to the Mind"  
(Turtle Island 11)

This poem has a typical Zen Buddhist background in which all elements here a friendly relationship. Snyder here describes a process of human evolution in a deep poetic vein.

To conclude, it may be said that almost all Snyder's poems spring from direct experience and immediate understanding of things. Snyder is not a poet who moves from the

range of mind to touch upon the reality of life. He is out and out rooted in the reality of benign impulses and emotions. Nothing comes to Snyder as a premeditated act either in his poetic endeavour or in his response to life. There is always an integral relation between his actual experience and his poetic expression moreover, his way of living influences his poetic endeavour and his poetic art is born out of his poetic relation between his living and intuitive visualizing.

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**Failure is the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently.**  
**~ Henry Ford**