Healthy Establishment of Reciprocal Relationship between man and Nature as projected by Gary Snyder as a nature mystic in his poetry

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ABSTRACT  
This article is an attempt to nourish the healthy establishment of reciprocal relationship between man and nature and deep interaction between nature and human soul by humanizing the universe in a typical Zen Buddhist spirit. In all poems, Snyder gives expression to all virtues of Zen Buddhism as belief in the unity of all living things freedom from affectations and sophistication, simplicity and naturalness etc. This article examines how Snyder treats nature as a living being filled with consciousness and sensibility by proving the fact that nature is a living companion to be loved and wooed deeply and really by all humans for a deep and profound understanding of human life.

Key words: nature mystic.

Unlike many other contemporary poets, Gary Snyder is said to have established himself as a notable poet of repute in American field of poetry by providing an explicit formulation of his vision; although this formulation does not contain all the detail and tension of the vision as it is expressed in the poetry, it is one we can begin with:

“As a poet I hold the most archaic values on earth. They go back to the upper Palaeolithic; the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirths, the love and ecstasy of the dance, the common work of the tribe” (Myths & Texts P viii)

Clearly this resonates with the primitive strain in modernism as well as with a concern for the mythical modes of thought that are in legacy of nineteenth-century comparative mythology and anthropology. The values associated with nature can be seen as part of Snyder’s romantic heritage and poetic vision. What Snyder calls the “power-vision in solitude” stands as a healing power on the mind and soul of the poet. Snyder is of the view that since society was seen as spontaneous and self-regulating, it was accorded the status of a natural force. Nature got into his blood and spirit as felt by poets like Wordsworth and Thoreau.

Keeping aloof from the modern civilized people arises not out of his disliking for the human beings but out of dissatisfaction with their shallow way of life neglecting the realm of nature. In this poem, ‘Control Burn’, Snyder wishes people to love nature, to learn to respect her laws and follow the Indians’ so as to know the ways of nature. He writes:

“Fire is an old story I would like  
With a sense of helpful order with respect for laws of nature to help my land with a burn a hot clean burn (Mangarita seeds will only open after a
fire passes over or once passed through a bear). And then it would be like When it belonged to the Indians Before” (Turtle Island 19).

The poet wishes to establish reciprocal relationship between man and nature. Man speaks to nature and nature speaks to man as stated in the poem “By Frazier Creek Falls”,

“We are it
It sings through us
This living flowing land
is all there, for ever
we could live on this earth
without clothes or tools” (P41)

Snyder believes that man and nature are parts of one and the same thing. Nature herself is suggested to be speaking to the modern men through Snyder. In his article, ‘The Wilderness’, Snyder claims that Nature herself speaks to him... the voice that speaks to me as a poet, what Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice Nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Master” (Turtle Island). Snyder writes about nature not simply to show how good-looking landscapes are or how they affect the life of man but to change the western man’s attitude towards nature and to make him realise how his actions are causing harm to nature and how the whole attitude towards nature stands in need of a radical change.

To Wordsworth, Nature is primary and man secondary Man is subjected to Nature. To Coleridge, man is the centre to draw nature or to reject it. Nature is insensitive and it has no power over man unless he himself is ready to receive impulses from it. To Burns, man is primary and nature is secondary to his living but to Snyder, man and nature are the same. “Like Whitman, he sees man as an indissoluble part of the natural environment, flowing when he accepts and adapts to that natural heritage, creating a hell on earth and within himself when he is separated from it by his intellect and its technological and societal creations” (Rothberg 29).

The wholeness of man, according to Snyder, lies in his communion with nature. Human life flourishes in a rich way where there is a reciprocal response between man and nature. He wants man and nature to live together. In the words of Professor B.D.Sharma, “Gary Snyder is a champion of close co-operation between man and nature and rejects a civilization in which man regards nature as his enemy”(P93). The Wester civilization has become predominantly rational. A civilization highly based on reason does not pay any attention to the life of nature and states that wilderness is a sign of disorder and heap of unwanted things to be cleared. This is the voice of reason reflected not only in the western culture but in all cultures where life is made mechanical and ration. He expresses this view clearly when he says:

“There are many things in Western Culture that are admirable. But a culture that alienates itself from the very ground of its being-from the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature, the wild, self-contained, self-informing eco systems) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within is doomed to a very destructive behaviour, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behaviour. The West is not only the culture that carries these destructive seeds China had effectively deforested itself by 1000 A.D. India had effectively deforested itself by 800 A.D. The soils of the Middle East were ruined even earlier. The forests that once covered the mountains of Yugoslavia were stripped to build the
Roman fleet and those mountains have looked like Utah ever since” (Turtle Island 106-107).

Snyder in this passage treats nature as a living organism. He looks upon the forest as a living element filled with consciousness and sensibility. What he feels is that when any damage is caused to the forest, the trees weep and shed tears Snyder humanises completely the forest and any destruction of it is regarded by him as a process of dehumanization. In other words, he wishes man to establish very friendly ties with nature whose company makes him very profound and matured. In this perspective, nature is no longer inanimate but it is a companion to be treated equally, wooed and loved by all. He goes even to the extent of calling nature as a human family in his poem prayer for the Great Family” (Turtle Island 24). Mother Earth, air, dawn and dust, day and night, water, birds and animals, the sun, the sky, are all its members.

The idea of nature as a human family is derived from Snyder’s interest in Zen Buddhism. In classical traditions, nature had limited value whereas in Romantic traditions, it enjoyed good status. But in Zen Buddhism, the importance of nature was felt to be very great. According to Snyder, Zen Buddhism places it s belief in the unity of all things. The essential premise is that all living things are alive and it is in this respect that he treats mother Earth, plants, air, wild beings, water, the sun, the sky and the space with equal merit and human dimension. The entire universe is useful and it is also equally educative. He addresses all object of the universe as ‘living beings’. He speaks to them and communes with them. They, inturn, speak to Snyder and make his mind matured and his heart happy. He perceives a deep interaction between nature and human heart.

Nature makes a very deep appeal to the human heart. Even a rugged human heart undergoes a transformation in the presence of Nature. Snyder has realised the value of the influence of nature and he therefore endows nature with an intense human dimension.

“Zen”, as Stephen Mahoney observes, “is a nature religion. It is blooming at a time when western man’s celebrated victory over nature is less convincing than ever—but when his alienation. From nature, including his own nature, seems to be an accomplished fact” (P312). The realisation of the oneness of everything is considered to be a thing of great significance. By Direct experience of oneness with the universe, Zen Buddhism opens one’s mind’s eyes to a new dimension of existence and gives a direct experience of oneness with the universe. Snyder’s so-called nature poems are rooted in the practice of Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism regards the finding of one’s own nature, to be one’s attaining enlightenment. The poem ‘Avocado’ is evidently an embodiment of a Zen Buddhist idea. It is the realisation of a fellow feeling with the objects of nature that makes him cry with a poetic mission. The poet becomes conscious of the totality of the universe and finds a flower and the earth to be ‘identical things’. Snyder claims that the great earth has food enough for everyone who loves her and trusts her.....” (The Fudo Trilogy 8).

Truly speaking, Snyder humanizes the universe in a typical Zen Buddhist spirit. The special insight of his is that nature has a human family. Romantic poetry describes nature only as a living being. Snyder goes beyond that and describes it as a human family, because the universe, according to Snyder, strengthens the feelings of brotherhood, human compassion, union and mutual co-existence. Snyder gave expression to all such virtues of Zen Buddhism as belief
in the unity of all living things, freedom from affectation and sophistication, simplicity and naturalness, as far as possible in all representative poems. “Snyder sought to inculcate an awareness of the natural environment. It is a problem of love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it ... man’s life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems” (Sharma 49)

The poem ‘Kyoto: March” is an excellent description of Nature in all its manifestations:

“A flew light flakes of snow
Fall in the feeble sun” (P20)

It is almost a kind of Hellenic setting (the early Greek Romantic background) where snows are falling in the dim sun in terms of slices. Birds are singing. The plum, a stone like fruit, is blooming in a chill manner. The moon is seen in a glimmering way. Jupiter, a big planet, is found at a high altitude in the sky. The ‘dove’ is crying which looks like twanging above. The poet sympathetically identifies himself with all objects of Nature. The dove crying creates a romantic sensation bringing a mood of joy and melancholy. Snow falling, birds singing, dove crying, night found in meditation are the romantic scenes that bring a new vitality and hope to any observer. The earth is described as full of trenches made by the rains. The hills are found bathing in snow and the roofs of the houses are found to be full of frost. The lovers are found on a soft bed cover of snow and they part. The last section deals with a multi-facet description of lovers, ice falling and feeding children. In all description of Nature, human life is at the centre. The phrase ‘frosty house’ reminds one of a picture where life lingers in a casual way without any excitement and tension. All these descriptions indicate silence, sorrow, meditation and melancholy mood of reflection. These are romantic elements and Snyder expresses them all in his own way without sacrificing his individuality.

Wordsworth is disturbed to find man killing man and embodies his view in his poem ‘What man has made of Man’ but Snyder is disturbed, to find man killing birds and animals. In the poem, ‘The Dead by the side of the Road’, Snyder shows that a great red-tailed hawk is killed and thrown by the side of the road and its wings are used as ‘dance-fans’. Here he talks of the killing of a skunk, a fawn, a ring-tail, and a dove and ends the poem with an exhortation to pray to their spirits to bless us. In his poem, ‘Front Lines’, Snyder expresses his feeling of disturbance to find that trees are cut in large numbers and describes thus:

“A bulldozen grinding and slobbering side Slipping and belching on the top of the skinned-Up bodies of skill-lives bushes...”(P43).

He talks of the young ones of various animals and his observations arouse a feeling of pity for nature. He does so, for instance, in ‘Kyotto Born in Spring Song” where he describes the ways of a lizard baby, a centipede baby, a cat baby and ‘a mouse baby’ (Regarding Wave). Snyder is a lover of animals and he is pained to see animals being killed indiscriminately. Not only is this but the poet pained to see the forest when damaged. A bulldozer making its gigantic way and removing all things like bushes and trees creates a sade sight. The poet is pained to see the forest damaged by the bulldozer.

The maturity of man, according to Snyder, is based on his communion with Nature, animals and forests and birds. When this background of nature disappears in the name of progress, a dark future will be awaiting man. When nature loses its balance everything will be in astate of disorder and
man’ in a pitiable position because he can no longer commune with anything for positive growth in the poem “Mother Earth: Her Whales”, Snyder shows how human beings are thoughtlessly killing lower animals as china tigers, wild bears and monkeys have gone in a mist giving place to trucks, while in American, ‘invaders’ are waging wars against natural creatures and plants and

“the robots argue how to parcel our Mother Earth To last a little longer like vultures flapping Belching, gurgling, near a dying dove”

But Snyder also suggests in the following lines and also warns people that Nature too can accept the challenge and if it does, man will find it difficult to face the situation:

“May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elk/Rise/ and hill away that giving
from the robot nations” (P120).

Wordsworth does not fear nature’s ever becoming revengeful but Snyder does here. In Hardy's novels, Nature is shown to be causing misery to man but in Snyder's poems; nature is shown to be ill-treated by man. Snyder behaves like a dumb natures spokesman to man talking in human tongue, trying to bring it home to man that it is wrong on his part to indulge in such a large-scale cleaning of forests, killing of animals and shooting of birds. In his poem, ‘Ethnobotony’, Snyder mourns the death of an oak which a chainsaw bucks and quarters in the shed and shows deer muzzling and kicking it. The poet records his lamentation in the words,

“only I got just so slightly sick - taste all and hand the knowledge down”.

Snyder here further stresses what Thomas Gray, stresses in his Elegy written in a Country Churchyard or Wordsworth does in his poem “On the Death of a Dog” and goes a step a head because he laments the death of a tree rather than merely a human being or a lower animal. In the poem ‘O Waters’, he regards the Whole world as “a great earth sangha’ the members of which are the poet, Nanao, mountains, snowfields and soil.

Snyder is a nature mystic who has no faith in supernatural revelation. It does not mean that he is without faith. He has his belief in the munificence of nature. For him, nature contains a deep divine presence. This divine presence becomes real to a man of deep awareness. In Christianity, supernatural revelation is not a matter of experience. It comes as an act of grace creative thinkers like D.H. Lawrence and Wordsworth had great faith in purifying and ennobling influences of nature. They were not believers in a personal God but they were men who worshipped nature as an embodiment of the divine presence. Snyder believes in the worship of Nature as an embodiment of divine grace. In his opinion, a man attains and experiences states of ecstasy when he is found amidst birds, animals, sky and mountains. Snyder considers these creatures and objects to be ‘great teachers’.

To conclude, it may be said that the wholeness of man, according to Snyder, lies in his deep communion with Nature. Human life flourishes in a rich way when there is a reciprocal response between man and nature. Snyder treats nature as a living organism and looks upon even the forest as a living element filled with consciousness and sensibility. A life lived in deep communion with nature makes man very profound and matured in all respects. It is in this perspective that nature is no longer intimate but it is a living companion to be loved and wooed deeply and really by all humans for a deep and profound understanding of human life.
Works Cited

2. “By Frazier Creek Falls” *Turtle Island*
3. “The Wilderness” *Turtle Island*

Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, this time more wisely.

~ Anonymous